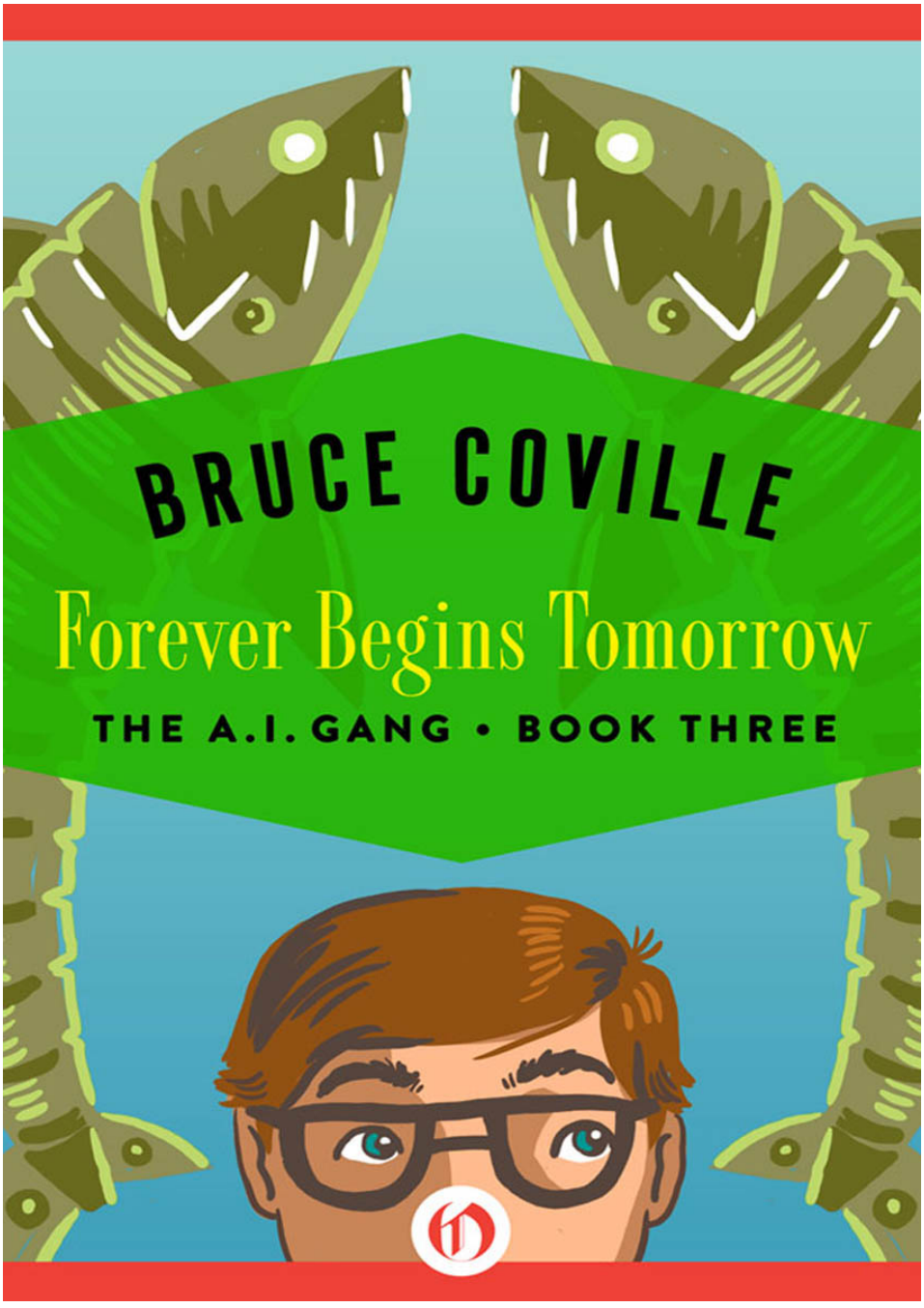
BRUCE COVILLE
Forever Begins Tomorrow
THE A.I. GANG • BOOK THREE

Forever Begins Tomorrow

The A.I. Gang, Book Three

Bruce Coville

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For Adam—and all the tomorrows yet to be.

“Put Some More Colors in Your Paint Box”

Roger Phillips ran a hand through his fiery red hair and stared at his father in horror. “You have *got* to be kidding,” he whispered.

He glanced down at the small computer Dr. Anthony Phillips had just set before him.

“You’ve got to be,” he repeated weakly.

“No such luck,” said Dr. Phillips. The barest hint of a smile flickered over his face.

Roger looked at the machine with an expression he usually reserved for creamed broccoli. “An electronic tutor? Lessons? *Homework?”*

“Afraid so,” said his father, struggling to keep his smile in check. “The government insisted.”

“What government?” demanded Roger. “Don’t tell me the Chinese are out to get me now!”

“No, I don’t think you’ve come to their attention yet.”

“You mean *our* government is doing this?” cried Roger. “In a period of global instability the United States of America is going to waste one of the great minds of our time on *homework?”*

Dr. Phillips shrugged. “Typical bureaucratic inefficiency. You’ll just have to live with it.”

Rachel, Roger’s twin sister, wandered in from the kitchen, where she had been making herself a cup of coffee—a habit her father often warned her would stunt her growth. Secretly Rachel was hoping he was right. She had decided she was tall enough two days ago when she noticed she had passed their handsome friend Hap Swenson by half an inch.

“What’s going on?” she asked, taking a sip from a steaming mug that said “Love Me, Love My Computer” in dark blue letters.

“You’ll never believe it,” said Roger. He turned to his father. “You tell her, Dad. I can’t bring myself to do it.”

“You’ve got a new tutor,” said Dr. Phillips, gesturing to the small computer. “Actually, this one is Roger’s. Yours is still in the Jeep.”

Rachel’s face fell.

“Oh, come on,” said Dr. Phillips, his voice tinged with exasperation. “What did you two expect—a permanent vacation? Just because we’re living on an isolated island while I work on Project Alpha, you can’t think your education is going to come to an end! Frankly, I was relieved when Dr. Hwa gave me these computers. I think having too much spare time has been responsible for a lot of the trouble you and your friends have gotten into these last few months.”

“Who’s in trouble?” exclaimed a metallic voice. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Shut up, Paracelsus,” said Rachel. “No one’s talking to you.”

The handsome bronze head sitting on the Phillipses’ coffee table blinked its eyes in preprogrammed astonishment. “No one’s talking to me? What am I, a social outcast?”

Rachel turned to her brother. “If you don’t stop tampering with his shutoff cues, someone’s going to rearrange *your* circuits.”

“Help!” shrieked Paracelsus. “Circuit attack! Circuit attack!”

Heaving a sigh, Dr. Phillips reached across the table and deactivated the

head. “Sometimes I wish you two had never dreamed this thing up. It’s made normal conversation almost impossible around here.”

“Shhh!” hissed Roger. “Just because he can’t talk doesn’t mean he can’t hear you.”

“Roger,” said Dr. Phillips sternly, “I don’t want you acting like that machine —or any other—has a personality. It’s sloppy thinking!”

“Then I can’t possibly use this electronic tutor. I can’t learn from someone I can’t relate to!”

Dr. Phillips made no response.

“Well, maybe if I tried real hard,” said Roger, reading the expression on his father’s face and deciding a momentary defeat was preferable to death.

“I thought you’d see it my way. Now, let me show you how this works.”

Though he had figured out the machine within seconds of seeing it, Roger sat quietly through his father’s demonstration. His mind was elsewhere, trying to find a way to explain that he didn’t have time for this stuff when he and his friends were busy protecting Project Alpha from a spy who would stop at nothing to send every bit of top-secret research done on Anza-bora Island to the terrorist organization known as G.H.O.S.T.

A mile or so from the Phillips home, Ray “the Gamma Ray” Gammand was standing on the foul line in the Anza-bora base gymnasium. He pushed his thick glasses back up onto his nose and stared at his beloved basketball.

“You can do it,” he whispered, trying to convince the ball it was going to make it through the hoop on his first shot. “All you have to do is think positive!”

Though Ray would have died of embarrassment if anyone had caught him talking to his basketball this way, he was so attached to the thing the rest of the gang already half suspected him of doing so.

He was on the court now to work out his frustration over the morning’s appalling news about the electronic tutor. He had had to wait for the maintenance crew to finish their morning game, which had only added to the tension he was feeling. But he was ready to practice at last. Taking a step forward, he tossed the ball. It bounced off the backboard, wobbled on the rim for a heartbreaking instant—then fell the wrong way.

Ray said his stepmother’s least favorite word. “Ah-ah!” said a husky female voice. “Temper and basketball don’t mix.”

Ray turned, his cheeks warm. “Hello, Dr. Fontana. I didn’t know you were there.”

Dr. Marion Fontana, who had come through the side door of the gym, picked up the ball. She was one of the hardware specialists for the artificial intelligence project that had brought the families of the A.I. Gang to Anza-bora Island. She was also a fitness nut, usually to be found jogging with Dr. Bai’ Ling, a raven-haired lady who gave new meaning to the phrase “well designed.”

“Here,” she said, tossing Ray the ball. “Try it again. But watch your breathing this time. You muffed your last throw by exhaling wrong.”

Distracted by wondering where Dr. Ling might be, Ray threw the ball far wide of the hoop.

Dr. Fontana sighed. “Here, watch me.” Retrieving the ball, she made a perfect swish. Then she dashed under the basket, snatched the ball before it could hit the

floor, dribbled it down the court, ran through a series of snappy maneuvers, and sank three more baskets before Ray could catch his breath.

"See?" she said, tossing the ball back to him. "It doesn't have anything to do with height!"

Ray, not yet five feet tall and seemingly on permanent hold as far as growth went, looked at Dr. Fontana gratefully. Though he knew she was being too flip when she said height had nothing to do with basketball, he also felt more hopeful about what he *could* learn to do than he had at any time in the past year.

"Would you like me to give you a few tips?" she asked, joining him at the foul line.

Oh, my God, thought Ray, *I think I'm in love. If only she wasn't over forty!*

While the Gamma Ray was getting his basketball lesson, his friend Trip Davis was getting a lecture about the new electronic tutors.

"Be reasonable, Tripton," said his mother, Dr. Millicent Davis, in exasperation. "It won't be that bad!"

"That's what you told Lunkhead here the day you took him to the vet to be fixed," said Trip, stroking the grotesquely overweight cat sprawled in his lap.

"Tripton Duncan Delmar Davis!"

Trip winced. His mother never resorted to his full name unless he was in real trouble.

Her tapping foot confirmed that this was indeed the case.

Trip looked at his mother.

Arms folded over her white lab coat, she glared back.

Trip's father, the highly respected landscape artist Elevard Crompton Davis, sat across the room, chuckling to himself.

"Cromp!" snapped Dr. Davis. She pushed back a strand of the ice-blond hair that had escaped from the severe bun in which she wore it. "Talk to your son!"

Trying to kill the smile on his face, Mr. Davis ambled over to where his wife and son were facing off. "What do you want me to say?" he asked, placing a paint-stained hand on his wife's shoulder.

"I don't know! Tell him how important schoolwork is. Tell him we want him to achieve so we can be proud of him. Tell him we'll kill him if he doesn't straighten out."

Mr. Davis nodded. Turning to Trip, he said, "Everything your mother just said is true."

"Cromp!"

Mr. Davis sighed. "Look, Tripper, I know you and your friends are keeping busy with all kinds of projects. But you can't concentrate on nothing but computers. You have to develop all the strands of your knowledge and ability."

"Why?"

Mr. Davis paused. He looked puzzled for a moment, then took his son by the arm and led him to the easel where he was putting the finishing touches on his latest painting. Next to the easel stood a small table holding his "art box," a wooden container cluttered with tubes of paint and brushes of every size and shape.

He took the canvas from the easel and put a blank one in its place. To Trip's astonishment, he then dumped the box of paints and brushes onto the floor.

“All right, that’s your life,” he said, pointing to the blank canvas. “Hardly touched, yours to do with as you will.”

Trip nodded, wondering where this was going.

His father bent over and picked up a single tube of paint and one medium-size brush. He dropped them into the art box, handed the box to Trip, and said, “Now paint.”

“It’s going to be kind of dull with only one color.”

Mr. Davis shrugged and tapped his son on the forehead. “Then put some more colors in your paint box. Take it from an artist: It will make your life a hell of a lot more interesting.”

Trip smiled. “Okay, I get the message, Dad. I’ll give the thing a try.”

Cromp Davis smiled back at his son. “That’s good,” he said. “To tell you the truth, if you want to live your life in black and white, that’s your problem anyway. But I appreciate you getting me off the hook with your mother. Come on, I’ll help you move this thing into your bedroom.”

Five minutes later Trip had settled himself in front of the new computer. He was already regretting the promise he had made to his father. Glancing at the array of electronic gadgetry scattered around his room, he fought down an urge to push the machine off his desk and turn his attention to one of the far more interesting projects he was currently in the middle of.

Shaking his head, he sighed and turned on the new machine.

Attached to the right side of the computer was a rack of tubes, each about the size of a roll of LifeSavers. Trip recognized them as a refined version of the Watson Double-Vapor Memory System, invented by Dr. Werner Watson, father of his friend Wendy Wendell. He smiled. At least this was a state-of-the-art machine. With their combination of durability and enormous memory capacity, the Watson tubes were a vast improvement on all previous storage systems.

The rack held two rows of five tubes. It was hinged at the rear, which allowed a user to flip it out to the side and read the labels on the tubes.

With a sigh, Trip swung the rack open.

The labels were pretty general: math, science, history, and so on. But he knew that with their memory capacity, each tube could hold a vast library of books and films on its assigned topic.

Grudgingly, he booted up the machine. The screen blinked into life with gratifying speed.

Trip blinked. The introductory message he found himself looking at was one of the weirdest he had ever seen:

“The first series of questions on this tube will help you prepare your computer to effectively meet your needs through all future lessons. It is essential that you answer honestly! Do you understand? Type *Y* for yes, *N* for no.”

What’s this honesty bit? he wondered as he pressed the *Y* key.

A new message appeared on the screen. Trip wrinkled his brow. This was even weirder than the last one:

“Thank you. Are you alone? BE HONEST! Type *Y* or *N.”*

What difference does it make if I’m alone? he wondered, tapping the Y key again.

When the next message appeared, he understood. After a brief jolt of surprise, he read it eagerly, then looked for a way to print it out.

Snatching up the paper, he bolted for the door, thinking, *Wait till the gang gets a load of this!*

Sherlock

Hap Swenson glanced up from the rivet he was tightening in Rin Tin Stainless Steel's jaw and decided that the robotic bloodhound would have to wait. The constant motion of the tiny blond girl striding back and forth in front of him was too distracting for him to do a good job now.

Hap watched her for a moment longer, studying the way she moved, the way she looked. The first thing anyone noticed about Wendy "the Wonderchild" Wendell was her height—or rather, the lack thereof. She was, in fact, the only person on Anza-bora Island shorter than the Gamma Ray.

After that you saw the pigtails, the grubby sweatshirt borrowed from her father, and the snub nose lightly dusted with freckles.

Wendy could be demanding and difficult. Yet Hap was extremely fond of her. For one thing, she made him laugh. But right now she was starting to drive him out of his mind.

"Will you settle down!" he snapped.

"I can't!" said Wendy. "This electronic tutor thing is such a plasmagorically revolting development that if I have to hold still, I'll blow up!"

"You can't be *that* surprised. I've been expecting it for weeks now. When my father accepted Dr. Hwa's offer to stay on Anza-bora after the Air Force pulled out, the main condition he and Mom insisted on was that my education be provided for."

"You've been getting an education," said Wendy tartly.

Hap laughed. "That's for sure. But it's not quite what they had in mind. They're getting a little tired of spies, plots, and life-and-death situations."

"It's better than being bored to death," said Wendy. "Which is exactly what's going to happen to me if I'm forced to use that tinker toy tutor."

Suddenly a three-foot-high collection of loose parts known as Norman the Doorman went scuttling past them. "Welcome!" it cried as it pulled open the door of the abandoned house the A.I. Gang used as a headquarters. "Welcome!"

"Thanks, Norman," said Rachel. She stepped into the room. "You're doing a good job today."

Roger came in after her, carrying the leather bag they used to transport Paracelsus.

"Welcome," said Norman again.

Roger crossed the room and took Paracelsus out of the bag.

"Welcome," said Norman for the third time.

"I take it you both got the bad news this morning?" asked Roger, turning to Hap and Wendy.

"Welcome," said Norman.

"Oh, chips!" cried Wendy. "Sometimes I wish Ray had never pulled you out of that trash heap, Norman." She crossed the room and thumped the robot soundly on the head.

"Thank you, sir," said Norman. It turned around three times, then rolled back to its closet.

"We got it," said Wendy. "My heart still hasn't recovered."

Rachel started to reply, but was interrupted by the door swinging open again. The six-foot-plus frame of Trip Davis loomed in the opening. "Where's Norman?" he asked, looking around.

"He's not feeling well," said Roger. "And what are you smirking about? Didn't you get your own private schoolroom this morning like the rest of us?"

"Sure did," said Trip. "And I got a little something along with it. I don't know if it's good news or bad news, but I bet you'll find it interesting!"

"He's not kidding!" exclaimed Ray, ducking in under his friend's arm. "Show 'em, Trip!"

Trip held up the message he had printed out a short time earlier. "I found *this* when I turned on my machine."

"What is it?" asked Wendy. "A ransom note for your brain?"

Trip shook his head. "Our mysterious friend is back."

Ray decided he was glad he had run into Trip along the way. If he hadn't already read the note, he would have been lost in the small mob scene now going on. As it was, he sat on his basketball and watched while the others clustered around their towering friend, demanding to see the message.

"Ah-ah!" cried Trip. He held the note over his head—which put it completely out of everyone's reach. "Why don't we run it through the optical scanner. Then Sherlock can put it up on the big screen and you can all read it at the same time."

"Sherlock" was a special program the gang had been working on for the last several months. Its name came from the fact that their initial plan, suggested by Roger, had been to write an artificial intelligence program that could act as a detective for them. The idea had been prompted by Ray's discovery of a small spy microphone on Rachel's collar after the first meeting of the Project Alpha scientists and their families.

The frightening realization that the bug must have been planted by one of the seventeen adults at the meeting had given urgency to Roger's idea. But the gang's project had rapidly grown to something much greater when they had deduced what Project Alpha was really about: an attempt to create a thinking computer—a computer that would actually be *aware* that it was thinking, aware of its own existence.

In short, their parents and the other scientists were trying to create a machine that could say "I am" and have some idea of what those simple but utterly mysterious words really meant.

Once they understood the adults' quest, the gang had decided to see if they couldn't beat them to the punch. It was an undeclared race—the adults had no idea what the kids were up to. But the gang took it very seriously. And now their work was beginning to pay off. Whether or not ADAM (the adults' name for the main computer) was actually approaching consciousness, the gang's Sherlock program had become a useful tool.

Roger, the group's unofficial leader, dashed across the room and switched on the scanner they had attached to their main terminal a few months earlier. "Be my guest," he said, bowing to Trip and gesturing to the operator's seat.

Trip exasperated the others by ambling slowly across the room, then acting

particularly fussy about inserting the message into the scanner.

No sooner was the paper in position than a small green light began to flash, indicating Sherlock had "read" the message. Trip flipped the display switch, and the message appeared on the main monitor—an oversize screen designed by Wendy and constructed by Hap.

Date: October 25
To: The A.I. Gang
From: A friend
Re: Our Mutual Enemy

Congratulations on thwarting Black Glove's attempt to use your rocket to send a transmitter into space when you launched Dr. Weiskopf's robot. Your work on that affair was outstanding.

"Outstanding!" snorted Roger. "Half the point of that project was to set a trap for Black Glove. Three of us nearly died in the process, and all we managed to find out from it was that B.G., whoever he or she is, has black hair!"

"Shhh!" said Hap. "I'm reading!"

I am sorry I am not able to reveal myself to you. It is impossible at this time. I can, however, tell you this: I am fairly certain I know Black Glove's identity. Unfortunately, I cannot act without positive proof. You must continue to be wary. The enemy is desperate—and dangerous.

I want to share a clue I uncovered recently—a scrap of paper with the following symbols:

!A@ @% ##)!$ #& @(

I am sure this is significant, but I can't make head or tail of it. Perhaps you will have more success with it than I have.

Good luck.
A friend

"Looks like a bunch of comic-strip cuss words," said Wendy, squinting at the screen.

"Could be a substitution code," said Ray.

"Could be," agreed Roger. "Let's feed the symbols into Sherlock. After all, that's the kind of thing we initially intended him for."

"Already done," said Rachel. "It happens automatically with anything that goes into the scanner."

"Great," said Wendy. "Now if we can just ask Sherlock the right questions, we might actually get somewhere with this."

"I have a possible solution," said Sherlock, about forty minutes later. The computer spoke through a voice simulator programmed to sound like Basil Rathbone, the actor who had played Sherlock Holmes in so many movies.

"Display!" said Roger.

A red light began to flash on the monitor as Sherlock listed the results of its long series of calculations.

Wendy scanned the screen and let out a low whistle. “Sherlock, you are a plasmagoric genius. In fact, you’re almost as smart as me!”

“Thank you,” said the computer. “Actually, it was elementary.”

Paracelsus was sitting on a shelf above the computer. Now the bronze head opened its eyes and muttered, “Smart-aleck machines give me a headache.”

“Thank you,” repeated Sherlock. “Actually, it was elementary.”

No one heard. The gang had already barreled out of their headquarters and was sprinting toward the trio of dune buggies they had checked out of the motor pool.

“I don’t get it,” said Ray, scrambling over the side of the buggy he shared with Trip. “How did the code work?”

“Later!” yelled Wendy, from her own duner. “If Sherlock is right, Black Glove’s probably got a transmitter in place already. It could be spilling Project Alpha’s secrets to G.H.O.S.T. right this minute!”

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

"Take the west beach, Roger," called Hap Swenson as he settled in beside Wendy. "Then cross the island when we get past the motor pool."

"Got you," said Roger. "Hang on, Sis," he added to Rachel as he switched on the duner's electric engine. He slammed his foot onto the pedal. Current flowed into the silent engine and with a spray of dust the dune buggy shot forward.

Rachel, the wind whipping through her outrageous flame-red hair, clutched the side of the buggy. *It looks like there might be a real storm brewing,* she thought, glancing at the sky. Her stomach was already jumping with that peculiarly pleasant excitement that accompanied the chase. A good storm, if not too severe, would add to the fun.

The dune buggy bounced over a rock and Rachel tightened her grip. A grim smile touched her lips. Where else could a pair of twelve-year-olds have this kind of vehicle at their disposal?

She glanced over her shoulder. The others were close behind, with Wendy in the lead. The look of fierce joy that lit the Wonderchild's face made Rachel laugh.

"What's up?" asked Roger.

"I was just remembering how Wendy drove her parents' Volkswagen through the doors of the computer center the night we saved the island from blowing up."

Roger smiled. "Did it ever strike you what a backward kind of luck that was?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in a way we owe a lot to the maniac who tried to blow us all up. If not for that bomb, we would never had found Black Glove's first transmitter—in which case it might still be sending Project Alpha's research straight to G.H.O.S.T.!"

Rachel glanced at her hands, which still bore a slight scar from the burns they had suffered when the transmitter had self-destructed while she was holding it.

The gang had first become aware of G.H.O.S.T. through their friend Dr. Stanley Remov, a code expert who had worked for numerous spy agencies before turning to pure research. He swore the mysterious initials stood for "General Headquarters for Organized Strategic Terrorism," a secret group out to take over the world. The problem was, the group was so secret most people refused to believe it even existed!

That was the case with Dr. Hwa. "Sheer nonsense," was his response whenever the question of G.H.O.S.T. came up. It was a hard charge to refute. The first transmitter the gang found had self-destructed before they could show it to anyone. The second, located in the rocket they had prepared to take Dr. Weiskopf's robot Euterpe into orbit, had actually been seen before it disintegrated. But since the rocket had also been tampered with by another spy—the notorious foreign agent Ramon Korbuscek—it had been easier for Dr. Hwa to blame the transmitter on him than to believe that it came from G.H.O.S.T.

Dr. Hwa's reluctance to believe in G.H.O.S.T. didn't really surprise the gang.

Despite his responsibilities as director of Project Alpha, the diminutive scientist preferred to dedicate his time to the technology required for the project, and hated having to give attention to non-research problems. That tendency, combined with the fact that the government itself refused to acknowledge the existence of G.H.O.S.T., made it possible for Dr. Hwa to convince himself there was no problem on the island.

The gang knew better. Dr. Standish and Ramon Korbuscek had been distractions. The real enemy was still undiscovered—and still trying to find a way to smuggle information from Anza-bora Island to G.H.O.S.T.

But with any luck, we'll derail this scheme as well, thought Roger as he cut his wheel to the right.

Following Roger's lead, Trip gave his own wheel a sharp spin and began heading east across the island. His increasing skill as a driver pleased him—especially since he still carried unpleasant memories of the very first day he had been allowed to use one of the dune buggies and had nearly collided with Hap Swenson!

"Where are we going?" asked the Gamma Ray, picking himself up from the effect of the rapid turn.

"To the marina, I assume," said Trip.

Indeed, even as they spoke, Roger was turning into the circular parking area that fronted the island's docking facilities. Several boats of various sizes were moored in the harbor, rising and falling gently with the waves that rolled in from the Pacific.

"I hope *The Merry Wanderer* is available," said Hap.

Wendy smiled at the thought of the beautiful boat. When Anza-bora had been a fully operative Air Force base, the gang would have been hard-pressed to get their hands on something like that. Military regulations would have made it impossible.

But the government had already decided to close the base when Dr. Hwa approached the Department of Technology for assistance with Project Alpha. With the help of his powerful political connections he had convinced the President that the artificial intelligence project was a perfect use for facilities that would otherwise go to waste. So the government had agreed to grant him use of Anza-bora. In return the Feds had insisted on keeping a small security force here. The reason was simple: While Project Alpha was an independent effort, the government felt the results might be important, even vital, to national security—which was one of the reasons it was willing to help to begin with.

Despite the security force, Anza-bora's rules were far more relaxed than those of an ordinary military base; the gang was allowed access to almost all of the island's resources without ever being questioned.

This was partly Dr. Hwa's doing; he didn't want bored children distracting his scientists.

Actually, boredom has been the least of our problems, thought Wendy as she brought the dune buggy skidding to a halt behind the others. *Some days it seems as if just staying alive heads the list!*

"I'll grab a couple of sets of scuba gear," yelled Hap, jumping over the side of the buggy without bothering to open the door.

“I love an eager beaver,” said the Wonderchild as she watched her husky blond companion sprint for the storage shed. The remark sounded sarcastic, but the glow on Wendy’s face showed her true feelings: She couldn’t wait for the fun to start.

Less than five minutes later the gang was climbing aboard *The Merry Wanderer*. Rachel took the controls, and they headed out of the small harbor.

Hap came to stand next to her. “God, I love the smell of the sea air,” he said, taking a deep breath.

Rachel smiled, enjoying the way the wind tousled his blond hair.

“Have you got that current detector, Ray?” asked Roger.

“I think so.” The Gamma Ray began pulling stuff from his pockets, searching for the homemade device that had already served the gang so well by revealing the microphone that had been planted on Rachel’s collar.

“You should get a purse,” said Rachel, turning her attention from the open waters to survey the rapidly growing pile at Ray’s feet.

“Too much bother,” said Ray, pulling two quarters loose from an unwrapped caramel in which they had become embedded. “I’d probably forget it every time I put it down.”

“It looks like you never forget anything,” said Roger, who was continually amazed by the amount of garbage Ray could stuff into his pockets. “What do you need *that* for?”

“Emergencies,” said Ray, dropping the large rubber lizard that had prompted Roger’s question onto his stack of stuff. “Ah, here’s the current detector. New improved version, actually. I suppose you could call it the *current* current detector.”

He held out a small, square device that had several wires protruding from it. “Dad and I added a couple of new twists that really extended its range,” he said proudly. “This baby can pick up the electricity in a hearing aid at thirty paces.”

“Well, climb up on the front of the boat and see if you can pick up Black Glove’s latest transmitter,” said Roger. “If Sherlock is right, it must be planted somewhere near the mouth of the harbor.”

Ray looked at Roger nervously. “I’m not the world’s greatest swimmer.”

“I’m not asking you to swim. I just want you to use the scanner to see if you can spot the transmitter. You understand how it works better than any of the rest of us. But if you want one of us to go up instead…”

“I didn’t say that!” protested Ray. He glanced around at the others. “I’ll go. Just make sure you pull me out if I fall in.”

“Of course,” said Trip. “If we don’t, we’ll be stuck taking care of all that stuff you had in your pockets.”

“Yuk-yuk,” said Ray. Bracing himself on the windshield, he climbed around onto the prow of the boat. Then he lay on his stomach and extended the current detector in front of him.

While Trip and Hap went below to change into the scuba gear, Rachel began steering the craft in long sweeps back and forth across the front of the harbor.

Half an hour went by. The wind grew stronger. Rachel began to have trouble keeping the boat steady as it crested the increasingly stiff waves.

“If we don’t spot the transmitter in a few minutes, I think we’d better head

in," she said nervously. "I don't think I can control the boat much longer."

A light rain began dappling the waves.

"I hate to turn back without finding it," said Roger. "Who knows what information Black Glove might get off Anza-bora between now and tomorrow?"

Hap cleared his throat. "I don't want to be a wet blanket—"

"You won't have much choice if this rain keeps up," said Wendy, interrupting him.

"Cute, Wendy. But if we're lucky, the storm will be like you."

"Exciting?"

"No. Short."

Roger, well aware of Wendy's low tolerance for short jokes, grabbed her shoulders to keep her from jumping at Hap.

"What I was trying to say," continued Hap, ignoring the Wonderchild's glare, "was that we have to consider the possibility that Sherlock was wrong. Maybe there isn't a transmitter here."

"Not a chance!" cried Trip.

"Look, it's a fantastic program," said Hap. "But we both know it still has some weak points—"

He was interrupted by a shout from Ray. "Stop the boat! I think I've got something!"

Concentrating on dealing with the waves, Rachel was so startled by Ray's shout that she pulled back on the throttle too hard and accidentally threw the boat into reverse.

It was as if they had run into a brick wall. *The Merry Wanderer* shuddered, lurched to a stop, then shot backward with a roar. Crying out in dismay, Rachel jammed the throttle back to neutral. The boat began to slow. But it was too late for Ray. The rapid change in direction had sent him flying off the bow. He hit the water about twenty feet ahead of them, then disappeared beneath the waves.

"There he is!" cried Wendy as Ray came gasping to the surface. He was floundering and shouting for help.

"You guys had better get out there," said Roger to Trip and Hap. "He's in big trouble!"

"We're on our way," said Hap. He and Trip, now clad in full scuba gear, flipped backward over the side of the boat. Within seconds they were heading toward the spot where Ray thrashed desperately in the water.

The wind continued to rise, whipping the waves higher and higher. The rain became thicker. Wendy had all she could do to spot the Gamma Ray as he struggled to keep his head above the water. "Come on, guys," she muttered to herself. "He needs help *now!"*

Trip was the first to reach Ray. Hap was close behind him. To their surprise, they found their friend clinging to the handles of a metal sphere about the size of his beloved basketball.

"I got it, guys," he whispered wearily. "I got the transmitter!"

Then he went under.

Hap swam beneath him, grabbed him from behind, and pulled him to the surface.

The Gamma Ray was unconscious when they broke through. Hap tried to pry his arms from the transmitter, but found that Ray was gripping the thing almost

as if it were a life preserver.

Spitting out his air tube, he yelled, “Trip, I can’t get him to let go of the transmitter!”

“Then let’s just haul him over to the boat.”

“We can’t! The damn thing is anchored in somehow!”

“I’ll take care of it,” said Trip. Slipping his own air tube back into his mouth, he plunged beneath the surface. His heart sank when he saw the chain trailing from the metallic ball locked in Ray’s grip. It stretched down until it was lost from sight in the deep blue water.

Wondering how far it was to the bottom, Trip took an underwater torch from his utility belt and began trying to burn through one of the links.

Seconds after Trip disappeared beneath the surface, Wendy spotted a new danger.

“Shark!” she screamed. “Hap, there’s a shark behind you!”

Spinning in the water, Hap shouted in horror at the sight of the huge black fin bearing down on him and Ray.

Then the heavens opened up as the rain began for real, falling in sheets from the iron-gray sky. Within seconds the three kids in the boat were as wet as the ones in the water.

The Merry Wanderer was thrown from wave to wave. Leaning over the edge, Wendy craned her neck and tried to shield her eyes from the pounding rain.

It was useless; she had lost sight of the boys—and the shark.

Underwater, unaware of either shark or storm, Trip had a shock of his own: The transmitter chain was being retracted! Whatever it was anchored into was slowly drawing the transmitter—and with it the three of them—toward the bottom of the sea.

Hap, clutching the still unconscious Gamma Ray in his arms as he fought the waves, felt himself being pulled down. Fighting back a surge of fear, he slipped his air tube between his lips, then clamped one hand over Ray’s nose and mouth. He cursed the around-the-neck design that kept him from sharing his hose with Ray as he tried to pry his friend’s arms from the metal ball. It was no use; Ray was clutching it as if his life depended on it. But the truth was, his life depended on his letting go of it!

Come on, Trip, Hap thought desperately. *Get us out of this mess!*

Several feet below him, Trip was trying to do just that. Glancing up from the link he was trying to sever, he saw that the slowly retracting chain had pulled his friends beneath the rain-spattered ocean surface.

Angrily he redoubled his efforts with the torch. He had to get them loose!

“They’re under again!” cried Wendy, who had spotted Hap just in time to see him disappear beneath the waves.

“Hold your course, Rachel!” yelled Roger. “We’ve got to get over to them!”

“I can’t!” cried his twin. “It’s too—”

Rachel’s words were cut off by a huge wave washing over the side of the boat.

Rachel clung to the wheel.

Roger clung to Rachel.

Wendy had nothing to cling to. When the wave was gone, so was she.

Four of the gang were in the water now. The storm continued to rage, the waves growing higher and higher.

And as the transmitter pulled him deeper into the water, Hap Swenson looked up to see the enormous shark circling overhead.

I've heard of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, he thought bitterly, *but this is ridiculous*.

His conviction that things could not possibly get worse was proved wrong when a panel slid aside on the front of the transmitter Ray was clutching so tenaciously.

Beneath the panel was a glowing time display.

Its numbers were changing, counting down from 60.

When they hit 55 the transmitter itself began to glow.

Hap's stomach tightened into a painful knot. Black Glove's transmitters had a habit of self-destructing once discovered. He had a sudden, terrible feeling that this one was about to do the same thing.

Only this time it was going to happen in a very big way.

And Ray was still clutching the bomb as tightly as ever.

Missing in Action

Several miles from the life-and-death struggles of the A.I. Gang a short woman slipped quietly into the office of Project Alpha's director, Dr. Hwa.

Though she had long ago memorized the location of every one of the sixteen secret alarms hidden in the room, the woman was still nervous as she made her way toward the scientist's desk. The reason was simple: She had no right to be here. *At least*, she thought, *not at this time, or under these circumstances*.

Still, she had a job to do, and she was willing to take whatever risks were necessary to do it right.

Circling to the back of the large mahogany desk that stood near the window, she tried one of the drawers.

Locked.

No matter. She pulled a slender piece of metal from the sole of her shoe and inserted it in the crack at the top of the drawer. The latch resisted her for a moment. Then she gave the little strip of metal a well-practiced twist.

Smoothly and silently the drawer slid open.

Smiling slightly, the woman pulled a sheaf of papers from the drawer and began to scan through them. After a moment she threw them down in disgust.

Nothing!

She unlocked another drawer and tried again.

The results were no better.

Nor were they improved by her third and fourth efforts.

It was the fifth drawer that yielded results.

The woman chuckled as she spread the papers out on Dr. Hwa's desk. It was so amusing of the good doctor to assume that his "private" papers were safe here in his own office.

How little he really knew!

Humming softly to herself, she took a microcamera from her pocket and began to photograph the secret documents. As she shot each page, she glanced quickly over it. Suddenly she stopped and picked up the paper she was photographing to read it more carefully.

A strange expression crossed her face.

Moving as quickly as she could, she took the last three photos, returned the papers to their proper place, and ran from the room.

Wendy's first reaction when she was swept overboard was raw panic. That lasted about two seconds—as long as it took her to decide that since she was in the soup already, she might as well make the best of it and try to help the others.

With no further hesitation she kicked off her shoes, peeled off her sweatshirt, and began swimming toward the spot where Hap and Ray had gone under.

She hadn't forgotten there was an enormous shark circling the area. It just wasn't as important as the fact that her friends needed help.

Several feet below the surface Trip continued to work furiously at the chain.

As it pulled them deeper the clear water grew ever more dark and mysterious; it reminded Trip of the time he and Hap had been trapped in a tidal shaft in the island's power plant.

He grimaced. It was Ray who had gotten them out then. Now it was their turn; they *had* to get him loose!

Trip looked up. The water at this level was so dark he didn't expect to find much more than shadows.

To his amazement, he saw a bright light above him.

Amazement turned to horror as he realized that the metal sphere Ray was clutching had started to glow like a small sun.

He redoubled his efforts with the torch. He didn't know what that ball was, but he had a gut-deep conviction that it would be very unhealthy for them to be around it much longer.

Above him, Hap was struggling desperately to disengage Ray's grip from the deadly transmitter.

Damn thing must have been set to go into action as soon as anyone tampered with it. I've got to get Ray away from it before it does… whatever it's going to do!

Hap's struggle was complicated by the fact that he had to keep one hand clamped over Ray's nose and mouth to keep him from drowning, leaving only one hand free to try to break his friend's grip on the transmitter.

If only he would wake up! thought Hap desperately.

With a sickening flash it occurred to him that Ray might never wake up. He didn't know how long the unconscious boy had been without air—or how long he could survive that way.

When Hap realized he was facing the unpleasant possibility of being blown to pieces trying to protect someone who was already dead, he considered letting go of Ray and swimming away as fast as he could. Something deep inside wouldn't let him. If there was even the slightest chance his friend still lived, he had to hang on and try to save him.

Rachel fought to control *The Merry Wanderer* as the storm continued to whip the ocean into a frenzy. The waves were higher than ever, the rain falling so fiercely she could barely see ten feet ahead.

The rain was also hindering Roger, who had a life preserver in his hand and was trying to spot Wendy so he could throw it to her. Clutching the side of the boat, he found himself actually thrust into the water as they lurched over so far they were close to capsizing.

"Hold her steady, Rachel!"

"I'm trying!"

But the boat tipped still farther onto its side, teetering as if it was about to go over.

"Come on, sweetheart," whispered Rachel through her teeth. "Stay with me. *Stay with me!"*

She felt her bones shake as the boat finally slammed back into position. Almost immediately another wave caught them and tipped them sideways again.

Suddenly a sound that had been almost lost in the roar of the storm disappeared altogether.

"That's it!" cried Roger. "The engine's gone! Now we're done for!"

"Damn!" cried Rachel, shaking the wheel in rage.

When the next wave struck, the twins had just enough time to take a deep breath before *The Merry Wanderer* went over and they were plunged into the raging water.

Not twenty feet from Roger and Rachel, but invisible because of the storm, Wendy continued to fight her way toward the boys. The effort of trying to keep her head above the water was exhausting her, and the wild sweep of the waves, the rushing heights and the plunging depths, was making her dizzy.

It's as if the whole world is made of water, she thought desperately.

To her horror, she spotted the shark just a few feet away. The nearness of that engine of death chilled her as no danger they had yet faced. Against her will, her mind formed an image of its great slashing mouth closing on her, severing and swallowing an arm or leg.

Cold fear ripped through her as the shark swam past, so close that its smooth skin brushed against her leg.

Despite her terror, her brain began to insist that something was wrong. *Why is that monster still on the surface?* it asked. And then: *Isn't shark skin supposed to be* rough?

Thirty feet away, and twenty feet under the waves, Ray Gammand finally ran out of air—which was what saved him from drowning.

Previously his mind had ordered his body not to let go of the transmitter. But when his lungs began screaming for him to take a breath, powerful reflexes built in by millions of years of evolution decided to disobey that order. Releasing his death lock on the transmitter he began clawing at his face. Air! He had to get *air!*

He's alive! thought Hap jubilantly as Ray began to writhe in his arms.

The moment of relief quickly turned to new panic. Even though he was unconscious, Ray had the adrenaline-fueled strength of someone facing death. If he managed to squirm free, if he broke Hap's grip on his mouth and nose, the same reflexes that had forced him to let go of the ball would order him to breathe.

And if he did that, he would fill his lungs with salty water and drown.

Launching himself away from the glowing transmitter, Hap began a desperate race to get Ray to the surface. As he did, another worry rose to plague him: Trip, unaware of what was happening above him, was continuing to work at the chain that held the fatal transmitter. If it blew, it was bound to take him with it.

Look up, Trip! thought Hap as he battled to keep Ray from trying to breathe before they could break the surface. *Look up!*

But he had no way to get the thought into Trip's brain.

The shark had made a great circle and was bearing down on Wendy again.

What a way to die, she thought bitterly. *Dinner for some overgrown fish with an IQ of eight!*

But the Wonderchild was not the shark's target. Shooting past her as if she didn't exist, the monster plunged beneath the surface, heading straight for Trip.

Before Wendy could begin to worry about her friend, the shark's broad tail caught her on the back of the head, knocking her unconscious.

Got it! thought Trip triumphantly as the chain finally separated in his hands. *Now we can get out of here!*

He looked up to signal Hap and Ray.

They were gone. In their place, heading straight toward him, was a great white shark.

Trip's gut wrenched, and he experienced a moment of paralyzing fear as the shark hurtled toward him. Hanging frozen in the water, his heart trying to pound its way out of his chest, he had a momentary fantasy of swinging the chain with the transmitter/bomb at the end and smashing it into the shark's head. But what might have worked on land was useless here in the water; there was no way he could get any momentum with the ball and chain.

Nor was there any way to outswim the creature.

That left him no choice but to outthink it.

Rachel and Roger were clinging to the life preserver Roger had been trying to throw to Wendy when they capsized. Both were scanning the waves for any sight of their friends.

When the pounding rain subsided for a moment, Roger spotted the Wonderchild floating face down about forty feet away.

Letting go of the life preserver, he began swimming in her direction. An enormous wave lifted him, then plunged him down. He shook the water out of his eyes—just in time to see Wendy disappear beneath the surface. She went down so rapidly it was as if something had actually pulled her under.

Praying that his timing would be accurate, Trip began to pull on the chain, drawing the brightly glowing transmitter/bomb *closer* to him. In doing so, the gangling blond was making himself the point of an angle where two deadly forces—the shark and the bomb—would soon converge.

Only Trip had no intention of being there when they did. With all the strength he had left, he swam down and away, hauling the bomb behind him.

His timing wasn't merely accurate, it was inspired. No sooner had he replaced himself with the bomb than the unwitting shark swallowed the glowing ball whole!

Trip was still clinging to the chain when the shark struck. He felt his arm being wrenched nearly out of its socket. Whipping around, he saw that the shark had turned and was heading for the surface. It was dragging him with it.

He let go of the chain and dropped back.

Hap, Ray, and the shark broke through at about the same time.

The boys were in one piece. The shark was in several thousand, most of them flying through the air.

Well, thought Hap, once the shock wave had passed, *that takes care of that*.

The storm was beginning to abate.

Ray was in his arms—gasping for breath, but alive.

Off to his right he saw Rachel clinging to a life preserver. Roger was splashing in the water not too far from her.

Another splashing, this time on his left, turned out to be Trip, breaking through to the surface. Ripping off his mask, he shouted triumphantly, "Trip one, Shark nothing!"

Hap smiled. So far, so good. But as he finished the slow circle he was making

to look for his friends, a sick feeling began to twist his stomach.

The Wonderchild was nowhere to be seen.

A Change of Plans

The storm was over. The sky, so dark and angry a short time ago, had become a great blue bowl arcing above the Pacific.

Its serene beauty was lost on the five forlorn youngsters huddled on the upturned hull of *The Merry Wanderer*. The capsized boat, equipped with almost indestructible flotation tanks, bobbed gently on the low swells—a tiny island in a vast ocean that stretched in all directions. The only break in the universe of water was a faint line on the horizon that the gang desperately hoped was Anzabora.

How far from home did the storm sweep us? wondered Trip dismally. The endless water made him nervous. Seeking escape from it, he looked up. All he saw was more blue. Lowering his gaze, he rejoined his friends in scanning the empty sea for any sign of their lost companion.

Strain as they would, their anxious eyes could find no trace of the Wonderchild.

"You know what I think?" asked Hap. He hesitated, half-expecting Wendy to interrupt him with a wisecrack.

"What?" asked Rachel softly.

He sighed. "I think we had too much good luck at the beginning. It left us feeling a little too sure of ourselves, as if nothing could really—" He broke off, his voice catching in his throat.

"Do you think she's really gone?" asked Ray. The idea seemed impossible to believe.

"I don't know," said Roger, his voice dead and lifeless. "One minute she was there, the next…"

"She was—*is*—a pretty good swimmer," said Rachel. "She could still be out there someplace!"

She shivered at the thought of Wendy lost somewhere in the vast ocean—alone, exhausted, trying desperately to stay afloat.

Grim as that image was, it was far better than the alternatives they were all trying not to think about: that the Wonderchild had drowned during the storm, or been eaten by the shark.

"What are you going to tell her parents, Roger?" asked Trip.

Roger started to protest, then bit back the comment. Trip was right; as unofficial leader of the gang, eventually the unpleasant task of speaking to Wendy's parents would fall to him. The thought of facing Dr. Wendell and Dr. Watson to tell them what had happened today made his stomach turn flip-flops.

The others were looking at him, waiting for an answer.

"I don't want to think about it now!" he said sharply. "I'm not *going* to think about it until there's no hope left. And I refuse to accept that idea yet."

Despite his bold words, the truth was that he couldn't help but think about it, and the idea left him cold with dread.

"We should have left that stupid transmitter alone," said Rachel bitterly. "What difference does it make to *us* if information gets leaked? We've tried and

tried to convince Dr. Hwa there's a spy on the island. If he's too dense—or too wound up in his stupid computer to see it—that's *his* problem."

"Someone has to take care of it," said Roger gently. "Remember, it's Dad's work we're protecting, too."

After that no one spoke for a while. The waves lapped at the side of the boat. Watching them, Hap was struck by how rapidly the ocean could change—brutal and angry one moment, calm and gentle just a short time later. Though he had spent most of his life at the edge of the water, he still found its power and unpredictability enormously frightening.

"What are we going to do?" he asked at last. "About Wendy, I mean."

"What can we do?" yelled Roger.

He turned away from Hap and stared out to sea. For all his light talk, Roger took his role as head of the group very seriously. He blamed himself completely for the loss of the Wonderchild, and the anger, fear, and remorse surging through him made it hard to think.

He took a deep breath. "What *can* we do?" he asked again, turning back. "If—I mean, *when* we get back to the island, we'll get a full search started." He looked out at the waves. "Unless any of the rest of you have some great idea you're keeping to yourself."

A glum silence greeted the remark.

"Maybe Rachel is right," said Trip an hour or so later. "Maybe we should just bow out. After all, this isn't really our fight. We've stopped the spy a couple of times now, and all we get for it is flak. Worse than flak, this time." He stopped, the lump in his throat preventing him from finishing what he wanted to say.

While Trip was talking, Ray had slid down the curve of the boat to the edge of the water. Now he scrambled back up to the others, clutching something in his hand, something he examined with growing astonishment.

"Chips!" he exclaimed at last, unconsciously using Wendy's favorite expression.

The others turned to look at him.

Ray looked back, a strange expression on his face. "I know how Trip feels," he said seriously. "I've had enough, too. But I think it may be too late for us to bow out." He held up his hand. A dark scrap of something that might have been fabric dangled from his fingertips. "Do you know what this is?"

"Yeah," said Hap, who was sitting closest to him. "It's a chunk of sharkskin. There's probably pieces of that monster floating around all over the place. Throw it back, Ray. It's disgusting."

"It would be," agreed Ray. "If it was real."

The others stared at him. An uncomfortable silence settled over the boat, as if they didn't want to hear what he might have to say next.

"All right," said Roger at last. "What are you talking about, Ray?"

"This," said Ray, stretching the scrap of "skin" between his fingers. "It's fake. Vinyl, probably."

"You're nuts," said Hap. "Real sharkskin almost feels like it's fake anyway."

"Does real sharkskin have springs clinging to it?" asked Ray, turning the scrap around. "Or thread running through the backing?"

Rachel's eyes widened. "So the shark was some sort of robot, set up to guard

the transmitter! Well, at least something makes sense now. I thought that monster showing up when everything else was going on was too much of a coincidence."

Roger let out a low whistle. "You know what this means?"

"Yeah," said Trip. "It means Ray is right: It *is* too late for us to back out. Whoever Black Glove is, she's had enough. The gloves are off, so to speak."

"You mean he's trying to kill us?" whispered Rachel.

"She's not playing post office," said Trip, looking back out to sea. "And she's not just trying. It looks like one of us is gone already."

The glum silence returned. When they had started out this morning, the struggle with Black Glove had seemed like a game. Spy versus spy.

Now it had become terribly real.

I want to go home, thought Rachel.

That was just before the sound of the approaching powerboat, and the sight of who was in it, caused a new turmoil among the group.

A dark-haired figure paced angrily back and forth in a secret room hidden beneath the Anza-bora computer lab.

Unbelievable! Those meddling brats actually destroyed both the transmitter and the robo-shark G.H.O.S.T. sent to guard it. What does it take to get information off this island?

Black Glove stopped pacing as advice from a nearly forgotten teacher came floating into memory: *If you can't find an answer, perhaps you are asking the wrong question.*

A slow smile began to work its way across the spy's face. *The wrong question! Maybe I shouldn't be asking how to get the information off the island at all. Maybe… maybe…*

A look of fierce joy lit Black Glove's face as a bold plan began to take form. Like most great ideas, it was essentially simple. If the information generated by the Project Alpha scientists couldn't be transmitted off the island, maybe it could be used right here.

Black Glove chuckled. *Why bother to have our scientists at G.H.O.S.T. try to duplicate the work being done on ADAM? Instead of building a whole new computer, why not just take over this one?*

It won't be easy, of course, thought the spy, continuing the mental debate. *ADAM is filled with safeguards against such a thing. But I've got the skill. Even more, I've got the necessary access to the computer. If I make just a few changes every day—slowly, carefully, so as not to arouse suspicion—then before anyone knows what's happening, Project Alpha will belong to G.H.O.S.T.!*

As the full possibilities of the new plan sank in, Black Glove began to tremble with excitement.

Before long, ADAM would be theirs.

Once that happened, the world would be theirs, too.

And then—why, then, *nothing* would ever be the same.

The gang could hardly believe their eyes. One of the Anza-bora cruisers was slicing through the water in their direction. Standing at the wheel was Staff Sergeant Artemus P. Brody, chief of the island's security force. Brody was no friend of the A.I. Gang—mostly because he didn't take kindly to the idea that the

kids had shown him up on more than one occasion. So it was likely that he would spend some time gloating over having to rescue them now.

But it was not the unexpected approach of Brody that astonished the gang.

It was the fact that standing next to him, grinning broadly, was the Wonderchild.

Dr. Hwa Has Had Enough

Dr. Hwa, hands jammed into the pockets of his white lab coat, paced angrily back and forth across his office.

His assistant, Bridget McGrory, stood safely out of his path, a slight smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. With the headaches the A.I. Gang had given her over the last few months, she couldn't help but be slightly amused to see them squirming now.

And squirming they were. After a brief stop at the infirmary to have the imposing Dr. Celia Clark certify that none of them were permanently damaged, Sergeant Brody had hauled the group straight to Dr. Hwa for a lecture on ethics, morality, propriety, proper use of island equipment, respect for safety rules—and anything else that might reasonably be thrown at them.

Brody would have preferred to do it himself. But every time *he* tried to lecture the gang, that snotty Roger started asking innocent-sounding questions that soon had him talking in circles and scrambling to remember whatever point he had been trying to make. He had decided it was safer to let Dr. Hwa do it, even if the little scientist was usually too soft on the brats.

To Brody's surprise (and delight) it looked as if this time might be the exception. Dr. Hwa seemed genuinely furious. Maybe the brats would actually get what they deserved for a change!

Roger's curiosity was almost out of control. As long as Brody was around, Wendy had refused to offer even a hint about what had happened to her after she vanished in the ocean. Roger was so desperate to get her story that he was barely able to resist his urge to ask Dr. Hwa to shut up so the gang could go out in the hall and grill the Wonderchild.

Dr. Hwa reached the end of the track he was wearing in the oriental carpet, turned back, and stopped directly in front of the gang. Pulling his hands from the pockets of his lab coat, he spread them in bewilderment. "I simply do not know what to say to you people."

The huge ruby ring on his right hand caught a ray of light from the ceiling and flashed with momentary fire. The spectacular jewel was the only ornament the diminutive scientist allowed himself, but it was the kind of thing that everyone noticed.

He thrust his hands back into his pockets, extinguishing the ruby's light. Hunching his shoulders forward, he looked plaintively at Roger.

"When you youngsters first came here, I did everything in my power to make this island a pleasant place for you. I put all kinds of equipment at your disposal: dune buggies, scuba gear, computer terminals… everything Anza-bora had to offer. Yet you constantly risk that equipment—not to mention your lives—and then try to justify your actions by telling me wild stories about some phantom called Black Glove, and his bizarre plots for spiriting information about Project Alpha off the island."

Dr. Hwa shook his head dismally. "If you could show me some evidence, it would be different! But all I get are theories, and speculation, and wild tales

about rogue email that disappears once delivered and transmitters that self-destruct and God-only-knows what other nonsense. I will grant you that we have had some serious security problems. But the only solid evidence you have for this Black Glove character is just that—some black glove that Dr. Wendell found. Good heavens! A lost glove doesn't signify anything more than that someone is absentminded! If popular clichés are correct, that should cover virtually my entire staff!"

From the corner of her eye Wendy caught a glimpse of Brody, rocking on his heels and grinning smugly. Spotting the look on her face, Ray grabbed her arm to hold her down. It was a smart move. Given another moment, the volatile Wonderchild might well have launched herself at Brody.

The grinning sergeant seemed oblivious to his near brush with catastrophe. The look on Bridget McGrory's face, however, told Ray that the secretary was well aware of what had nearly happened.

That didn't surprise him. He had been watching McGrory for some time now, since he had first noticed some suspicious actions on her part during one of their early visits to Dr. Hwa. Something about her struck him as being not quite right. One thing he had learned for certain: She rarely missed even the most subtle nuances of whatever was going on around her.

She certainly wouldn't have missed Wendy's reaction to Brody. It would take someone as dense as the sergeant himself to remain unaware of that!

A sudden drop in the tone of Dr. Hwa's voice caught Ray's wandering attention. He braced himself. When an angry adult suddenly got this reasonable, it usually meant big trouble.

"I hate to do this," said Dr. Hwa softly. "But until further notice I am banning you from all use of the island's equipment. Dune buggies, scuba gear, powerboats—they are all off limits until you can convince me you have developed some respect for their capacities—*and* their dangers."

Roger glanced at the others, then stepped forward. "Sir, if you would just—"

Dr. Hwa cut him off. "My decision is final." His voice was soft, but laced with steel. "We have too much at stake here for this to go on. Your foolish antics have been a constant source of distraction to the scientific work this facility was set up to accomplish. Indeed, they have reached a point where they jeopardize the entire project. If one of you should be injured, or worse yet killed, it would disrupt everything."

He smiled that warm, ingratiating smile that made it so hard to be angry with him—the same smile that had helped him persuade and cajole Project Alpha into existence to begin with.

"That may sound harsh and unfeeling, as if I care only about the project, and not whether you hurt yourselves. That is not true. I do care, very deeply. Unfortunately, you don't seem to care yourselves! So I am explaining my decision in terms you may understand more easily: When you endanger your lives, you endanger *my* project."

Suddenly his voice was filled with ice. "And *that* is something no one is allowed to do." He turned back to his desk. "This interview is concluded. You may leave now."

"But Dr. Hwa!" cried several voices.

"You heard the man," said Brody, smug as a playground bully who has

somehow managed to get the teacher to take his side. “Chitchat’s done, so move out! That means you, missy!” he added, grabbing Wendy—who had been dragging her feet—by the scruff of her neck.

“Let go of me, you big ape!” cried the Wonderchild. At the same time she stomped down with her full weight on Brody’s instep.

The security chief howled with pain and let go of her neck to grab his wounded foot.

Dr. Hwa sighed heavily.

Moving quickly, Wendy left the room on her own steam.

Roger paused at the door and looked back. “You’re going to regret this, Dr. Hwa,” he said quietly. “You’re making a big mistake.”

Dr. Hwa said nothing. His eyes were as hard as cobalt steel.

“So now what do we do?” asked Ray as the gang trudged back to their headquarters.

“We move slower and work harder,” replied Roger. He hunched his shoulders. It was moving toward twilight, and even though October in the Southern Hemisphere was a time when things got warmer instead of colder, as they were used to at home, the evening breeze could still be a little chilly.

He glanced back at the computer center, decided it was a safe distance behind them, and turned his attention to Wendy. “All right, give. What happened to you out there? Where did you go—and how did you get back to the island to get Brody?”

“How eager are you to find out?” asked the Wonderchild, trying to sound innocent but failing miserably.

“Wendy!”

“Give me a minute. I’ve got a few changes I’d like to make around here. I might want to make a deal—”

“Wendy,” said Trip, glaring down at her from his full six-feet-plus height. “There are certain crimes for which no court would convict a person. I think you’re on the verge of committing one. Cut the crap and tell us what happened!”

“When you put it that way, how can I resist?” asked Wendy, who was actually dying to tell her story. “Unfortunately, a lot of the details are a little fuzzy.”

“Just start with the part where the shark knocked you senseless,” said Rachel.

“Which wasn’t much of a change,” noted Hap.

To everyone’s surprise, Wendy ignored the dig and plunged into her story. “I don’t know how long I was actually out,” she said, slowing her pace and glancing toward the ocean. “But when I came to, I was a long way down. Talk about total panic. This was plasmarrendous! Can you imagine waking up and finding yourself under several feet of water?”

“Easily,” said Ray, thinking back to his own experience.

“Well, at least *you* went back up,” countered Wendy. “I was being pulled farther under!”

“By what?” asked Rachel.

“You mean, ‘By *who?’* Or, if you want to be grammatically correct, ‘By *whom?’”*

Wendy waited for the babble of reaction this statement generated to die

down. Finally she said, “Let me get through the whole story. You can ask questions when I’m done. Now, not only was I being pulled down, I had some kind of patch stuck over my mouth and nose. That was probably a good thing, since I was so out of it I might have tried to take a breath before I realized I was underwater. But it scared the living daylights out of me. I thought my lungs were going to pop!”

She shuddered at the memory.

“I was so confused that at first I didn’t even realize someone was holding on to me. I struggled like crazy—until I saw one of those underwater sleds ahead of us; you know, one of those two-person jobs, with a bubble dome?”

The others nodded. They had all seen the sleds, which were kept in storage at the marina. But they had never been able to cajole anyone into teaching them how to use the things. Roger had finally declared that he suspected this was because no one else on the island actually knew how to use them, either.

Clearly at least one person *did* know how.

“What happened then?” asked Rachel eagerly.

“I blacked out again! Next time I woke up I was lying on dry ground. Guess where?”

“Just tell us,” said Hap tartly.

She made a face at him. “In the cavern!”

Roger felt a little chill. The gang had thought they were the only ones who knew about the cavern.

“I wonder why this person took you there,” he said.

“I figure so no one would see the sub-sled,” said Wendy. “Remember, we always suspected there was an underwater entrance to the place.”

“Come on, Wendy—tell us who saved you!” demanded Ray. “I’m dying to find out!”

The Wonderchild spread her hands. “I don’t have the foggiest idea! When I woke up the place was empty. Thank God whoever it was had turned on a lantern—one of the ones *we* left there, by the way. Otherwise I would have been in total darkness. I probably would have figured I was dead and waiting for some angel to come take me to heaven.”

“That would have been some wait,” snorted Hap.

“That’s the end of it?” asked Rachel incredulously. “You don’t have any idea who it was?”

“Oh, it’s someone we know,” said Wendy. “I found this tucked under the lantern.”

She pulled a piece of paper from her jeans pocket. Roger snatched it before she could play any more games.

“Read it aloud!” demanded Rachel.

“I intended to.” Roger unfolded the crumpled paper. His face fell as he glanced at what was written there.

“What does it say?” cried Ray.

“Not much. Here are the exact words: ‘Nice work, but a little sloppy. Try to be more careful next time.’”

“That’s *it?”* cried Trip.

“Except for the signature. It’s signed—”

“Don’t tell me,” said Hap. “Let me guess. It’s signed ‘A friend.’”

“You got it,” said Wendy.

“I don’t know which is going to drive me crazy first,” sighed Rachel. “Our enemy—or our mysterious ally.”

Suspicions

"Well, Ray," said Elinor Gammand as she handed her stepson a thick wedge of chocolate cake with fudge icing, "did you have a nice day?"

The Gamma Ray looked at his stepmother speculatively. Was it really possible she didn't know about everything that had happened in the last few hours? He stalled for time by plunging a forkful of the rich cake into his mouth. The fact that Elinor was short enough, and had hair dark enough, to match their two clues to Black Glove's identity tended to make him nervous.

This was a fairly new problem. For a long time Ray had felt that his stepmother was too removed from everything to make a serious suspect. But on a recent overnight at Trip's, when they had stayed awake until nearly morning discussing the question of Black Glove's identity, his friend had reluctantly but logically pointed out that just because Elinor Gammand didn't *seem* to have any technical expertise didn't mean she couldn't be the spy.

"As a matter of fact," Trip had said, "the very appearance of ignorance makes a pretty good cover. Let's face it, Ray, three years ago she came out of nowhere to marry your father. Sure, no one knew about Project Alpha then. But considering your father's abilities, would it be surprising if some group interested in cutting-edge computer technology wanted him spied on anyway? If your stepmother was already working for G.H.O.S.T., she would have been the right person in the right place when this project began."

Though Ray had protested the idea vigorously, he knew Trip was right: Elinor had to remain on the suspect list.

He pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It just didn't seem reasonable that a spy could make such incredible cake.

"Ray?"

Mrs. Gammand was still waiting for an answer.

Suspect or not, was it possible neither Brody nor Hwa had contacted his parents to tell them about the gang's latest escapade?

He was searching for some nice, noncommittal response when a six-inch-tall polystyrene monster came bounding across the table. Leaping onto his plate, it began jumping up and down in the frosting.

"Warthos!" cried Ray's father. "You come back here!"

Ignoring its creator, the hideous, four-armed purple automaton continued to stomp through Ray's cake.

Dr. Hugh Gammand's towering figure rose from the other side of the table. Muttering in disgust, he snatched his newest character out of his son's dessert.

Ray gazed mournfully at the mutilated cake. He thoroughly enjoyed his father's passion for creating three-dimensional monsters. But the hobby did make the odds of completing a meal in peace in the Gammand household a less than fifty-fifty proposition.

Fortunately, in this case the monster had provided a useful diversion. His stepmother turned her attention to his father, launching into her "How many times have I asked you not to bring your monsters to the table?" speech.

Locating an undamaged corner of his cake, Ray popped it into his mouth. He consoled himself with the thought that if the gang's clues were accurate, at least his father was off the hook. At seven feet plus, Hugh Gammand was too darn tall to be Black Glove.

Wendy Wendell III had no such consolation when it came to her parents. They were *both* well under the five-foot-seven mark the gang had figured as Black Glove's maximum height after they had seen the spy run under a pipe suspended at that level.

At least Mom is a blonde, thought Wendy. *That lets her off the hook*. She paused, then added, *Unless they're working as a team!*

The Wonderchild glanced down at the plate of bean sprouts and stir-fried tofu she had been trying not to eat and wondered if it would really be so bad to find out her parents were spies. After all, if they got tossed in the slammer, maybe she would get sent to an orphanage where they served normal food (like hamburgers and french fries) instead of the super-healthy glop her parents always ate.

She poked at a sprout. The thing that really mystified her was that her parents actually seemed to *like* this slimy stuff. She could understand people who were in their thirties, and therefore well on their way to being ancient, wanting to take good care of their bodies. But she couldn't understand them enjoying it. At least, not if it involved eating goo like this.

Mrs. Wendell gestured toward Wendy's plate. "You didn't finish your meal, darling."

Fighting down several remarks that would have done wonders for her reputation as a smart-mouth but nothing for the sake of domestic tranquility, Wendy said, "I wasn't very hungry."

Her parents' acceptance of this explanation was a sign of the hours they had been putting in at the computer lab. Anyone who spent much time with the Wonderchild knew that hunger was a permanent condition with her.

"Did you have a good day?" asked Dr. Watson, spearing his last piece of tofu with his fork.

"It was… interesting," replied Wendy. Was her father genuinely ignorant of the day's events? Or was he baiting her, to see what she would say?

"How are you making out with your new tutor?" asked her mother.

Wendy seized on the question as an excuse to escape from the table. "Actually, I haven't started with it. You said I could choose the hours I put in. Since I already had plans this morning, I was waiting until tonight to work on it. I'd better get at it."

Before her parents could think of another question, she had slid out of her chair and was scooting down the hall, glad to be away from the cross-examination—not to mention the smell of that food.

Reaching the door to her room, she glared across the mess on the floor to where the shiny new computer sat waiting. "I hope you're ready to fight," she said, pushing up the sleeves of her sweatshirt. "Because this bedroom isn't big enough for the both of us!"

Plunging into her room, Wendy waded through the debris, prepared to battle the electronic intruder to the death.

Rachel looked up the path leading toward Dr. Remov's house. "I wonder if Dr.

Mercury will be here, too," she said.

Hap Swenson shrugged his broad shoulders. "Probably. It's not easy to find one of them without stumbling over the other."

Rachel hesitated. It was hard to believe chubby, exuberant Armand Mercury could be a danger to anyone. But the portly scientist did match their two clues… On the other hand, he was best friends with Dr. Remov, the only adult on the island willing to seriously discuss the gang's fears that a spy was trying to undermine Project Alpha. In spite of Dr. Mercury's frequent teasing on the matter, Dr. Remov was adamant in his belief that G.H.O.S.T. did exist, and deeply concerned that it might have infiltrated the project.

In her darker moments Rachel sometimes wondered if Dr. Remov was so certain about G.H.O.S.T. because he himself was one of its agents.

You've got to trust someone, she told herself, repeating her twin's comment on the situation. And as Roger kept pointing out to her, not only had Dr. Remov been a real help to them on more than one occasion, he was too tall to be the spy.

She shook her head. *Something's got to break soon or I'm going to lose my mind. I can't stand living in a situation that makes me so suspicious I wonder if the only reason someone is helping me is to cover his tracks!*

Hap nudged her with his elbow. "You still here?"

"What? Oh, sure. Sorry about that. I'm right beside you."

"What happened to ladies first?"

"I'm liberated. Get moving!"

Dr. Remov threw open the door almost before they rang the bell, which was the way he usually greeted them. A smile creased his freckled face. "Rachel! Hap! How nice to see you. Come in, come in!"

He ushered them into the living room, where Dr. Mercury sat with his pipe and a container of sudsy water.

"Armand—look who's here!"

Dr. Mercury was in the midst of blowing an enormous, rainbow-hued bubble. His real attention reserved for the work at hand, he didn't speak, only gave them a wink. Unfortunately, that slight motion was all it took to burst his bubble. It disappeared, spattering him with a fine spray of droplets.

"Oh, poop," he said softly. "You know, Stanley, this new formula just isn't working."

"I'm sure you'll get it eventually," said Dr. Remov, patting his friend on the shoulder. He crossed to a battered leather armchair and settled in with a sigh. "So—what brings you two here on this fine October night?"

"Fine, indeed," snorted Dr. Mercury. "Personally, I miss a nice, blustery, multicolored October. Living where the seasons are backward is going to drive me out of my mind."

"It will be a short trip," replied Dr. Remov. Turning to Rachel and Hap, he said, "I've only got a few minutes. I'm scheduled to meet Dr. Clark in the Brain Cell soon."

Hap lifted an eyebrow in surprise. The Brain Cell, the central command location for Project Alpha, was so secret usually the scientists wouldn't even acknowledge its existence. The gang only knew the term because Dr. Mercury had once blurted it out to Trip and Ray. None of them had managed to get inside

the place.

Noticing Hap's reaction, Dr. Remov shrugged. "You two are less of a security risk than someone else who seems to actually have access to that 'secret' location. So why play unnecessary games? Now, what's on your minds?"

Rachel quickly poured out an abbreviated version of the day's events, culminating in the interview with Dr. Hwa. Despite her belief that they could trust Dr. Remov, caution prompted her to leave out some of the details, such as Wendy's mysterious rescue.

Dr. Remov listened quietly, drumming his fingers against the arm of his chair. "And why have you come to me?" he asked when Rachel was finished.

"Two reasons, sir," replied Hap. "To begin with, we thought you should know what the enemy had been up to."

He nodded. "And the second reason?"

"We're confused about Dr. Hwa," said Rachel. "He was *really* angry with us. But as far as we can tell, he hasn't said a word to our parents. It doesn't quite add up, and we wanted to know what you thought about it."

"Since it isn't the kind of question you can ask your parents," said Dr. Remov with a chuckle.

"They could have asked me!" said Dr. Mercury, setting down his bubble pipe. "And since I'm here, I'll tell them!"

He turned to Rachel and Hap. "It's a simple matter of management. Our dear Dr. Hwa may come across as a pussycat, but the truth is he's about as soft as a concrete bed. He's well aware that your parents would go crazy if they found out some of the things you kids have been up to. He's also aware that if that happens it might interfere with his schedule for the project. So he simply doesn't tell them."

Dr. Mercury picked up his pipe again. "You'll never make sense of this if you think of it as a case of adults against kids. Think of it as Hwa against anything—*anything*—that might stand in the way of his machine."

He stirred the bubble water with his stubby fingers, then dipped his pipe back into it. "Am I right, Stanley?"

"I couldn't have said it better myself," replied Dr. Remov. The freckle-faced scientist turned back to Hap and Rachel. "Now, let me share something else with you. I've been doing a little digging on my own. Haven't come up with much—I'm too busy with the computer. But I have decided that there is something funny about Bridget McGrory. I can't put my finger on it; certainly I'm in no position to make an accusation of any kind. But you might want to keep an eye on her."

"You know, Ray's been saying the same thing," said Rachel. "I wonder what's going on there."

"But Bridget McGrory is just a secretary!" protested Hap.

Dr. Remov shook his head. "A bit of advice, my young friend. Never say 'just a secretary.' As you get older, you'll learn that secretaries really control the world."

"You don't think she could be building a back door, do you, Stanley?" asked Dr. Mercury.

Hap looked puzzled. "What does a back door have to do with anything?"

Dr. Remov steepled his fingers in front of his face. "A back door is a sneaky way to get into a computer's command structure. Designed well enough, it could

even let someone put in commands that would normally be blocked by previous programming."

"Like what?"

Dr. Remov shrugged. "Oh, a command that would lock out all the other researchers."

Hap's eyes widened. "Is that possible?"

Dr. Mercury set aside his pipe and his bowl. "Well, ADAM is fairly well protected against things like that; we embedded instructions to prevent it from accepting such input very deep in its architecture. But the truth is, no system is so secure it can't be cracked. Someone who is sneaky enough, patient enough, and smart enough might be able to get around those commands by constructing a completely new entrance to the computer. Not a physical door you could walk through, but the electronic equivalent: a back door."

Rachel felt a shiver. Growing up with a computer scientist for a father, she had often heard about back doors. But she had never thought about one in connection with Project Alpha.

"That couldn't really happen here, could it?" she asked nervously.

Dr. Mercury shrugged. "In this business, nothing is certain except uncertainty."

Computer Games

"Okay, Wendy," said Ray when the gang had gathered in their headquarters the next morning. "I've waited long enough. I know you studied the printout. So tell me; how did Sherlock break the code and locate that transmitter?"

The Wonderchild smiled. "I'm not sure I *should* tell you. When you find out how simple it was, you'll just want to kill yourself because the computer figured it out first. Then the rest of us will have to talk you out of it, which is really boring, and—"

Roger cut her off. "Wendy, if you don't tell him soon, I think it's more likely we're going to have to talk him out of killing *you*. Besides, I want to know, too."

"Oh, all right," said the Wonderchild, rolling her eyes. "C'mere, I'll show you."

She led Ray to one of the several keyboards scattered about the room. The others followed.

"Here's the coded message," she said. Her fingers seemed to fly as she pressed down the shift key and then typed in:

!A@ @% ##)!$ #& @(

Everyone studied the monitor as the computer reprinted the message.

"It still looks like comic-book cursing to me," said Hap.

"Probably because it is," said Wendy. "That is, it's done the same way as comic-book cursing, by typing the symbols that you get if you hit the shift key before typing on the keyboard's numeral row. Now, my dear Raymond, release the shift key and hit the same symbols."

Ray did as he was instructed.

"Do those numbers look familiar?" asked Wendy, pointing to the string of digits that had appeared on the screen.

162 25 33 014 37 29

"Yeah," said Ray. "A one, a six, a two… I use 'em almost every day. What do you mean, do they look familiar?"

"It's the number *configuration* she's talking about," said Roger. "The pattern of three digits, two digits, two digits, then repeated. And it does look familiar. Where have I seen it before?" He studied the screen for an instant longer, then groaned. "Oh, geez… they're latitude and longitude! Three digits for degrees, two digits for minutes, and two for seconds."

"And those digits are familiar, too," said Rachel, the memory expect. "That's where Sherlock told us to look for the transmitter yesterday!"

"You got it," said Wendy. "As for solving it, Sherlock worked in several steps. First, it guessed we were dealing with numerals. That three-two-two, three-two-two symbol pattern would be pretty uncommon for a verbal message. Not impossible, certainly. But less likely."

“Now, starting with the assumption—correct, in this case—that the answer was numerical, our brilliant program proceeded to do a pattern search, a hunt for things that might display the same arrangement of symbols. A five-four pattern, a set of five digits followed by four digits, might have indicated a ZIP code. Three-three-four would most likely be a telephone number, and three-two-four would be an old-fashioned Social Security number. A three-two-two, three-two-two pattern like we had isn’t that common. So Sherlock glommed onto the right guess almost immediately: geographic coordinates.”

“But how did it know which numerals to substitute?” asked Hap. “There would be all kinds of possibilities.”

“That’s a tribute to our good programming,” said Trip smugly. “Mind if I take it from here, Wendy? I want to see if I’ve figured this out correctly.”

“Be my guest.”

“To begin with,” said Trip, “you’re right about the possible combinations. But one of the thinking tactics we’ve programmed into Sherlock is the use of Occam’s razor.”

“Which was a really sharp idea,” said Paracelsus, dragging up one of the new stock of puns Roger had recently inserted into its programming.

“Ignore him,” said Rachel. “He’s suffering the electronic equivalent of brain damage.”

“Such hostility!” cried Paracelsus.

“What the heck is Occam’s razor?” asked Hap plaintively, trying to keep the line of reasoning straight in his head.

“It’s a rule that says in any given situation the simplest solution is usually the best,” answered Trip. “So Sherlock would have immediately seized on the simple one-for-one substitution of the shift characters as a likely explanation.”

“But it wouldn’t have stopped there,” said Roger proudly. “Once it had guessed that the symbols were really numerical coordinates and come up with a possible translation of digits to make it work, it would have begun checking to see if that translation made sense.”

“After all, there could have been several more steps to cracking the code,” said Rachel.

“Of course,” said Hap, who was beginning to feel like a caveman trying to make sense out of an automobile.

“But once it discovered that its translation had located a spot close to the island, it would have reasoned that this was probably correct. Then it was a matter of comparing new ideas with Black Glove’s previous actions. Combining those with bits and pieces of information we’ve gathered over the last weeks, it came up with the hypothesis of a transmitter at that particular location.”

“Why do I suddenly feel stupid?” asked Hap morosely.

“You shouldn’t,” said Rachel. “To begin with, despite what Trip might say, it was an accurate guess, not an infallible prediction. Second, it would have been a lot more useful if Sherlock had also predicted we were walking into a trap!”

“Of course, we could have thought of that, too,” put in Ray.

“Absolutely,” said Rachel. “But we let our emotions run away with us. Sherlock is supposed to think *without* emotion.”

“Really?” asked Hap. “So what happens if we succeed in making the program self-aware. Will it have emotions then?”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room.

"That remains to be seen," said Roger at last. "The most important thing to understand right now, Hap, is that it wasn't doing anything you couldn't do, if you had had the time and the patience. It was just doing it faster. The machine operates at five TRIPS, after all."

"TRIPS?"

"Trillion Instructions Per Second," translated their own personal Trip. "Fastest computer in the world at the moment. But it only reached that speed a week and a half ago. My mother and Dr. Fontana have been collaborating on that aspect of things. It's all very hush-hush. Mom hardly talks about it at all."

"Of course, we're not supposed to know that it's operating at that speed," put in Ray. "It's just that some of us have an inside track to what's going on with the main computer."

Wendy took the moment to huff a breath onto her fingernails. Polishing them against her grubby sweatshirt, she added cheerfully, "Once we—or our parents, if they beat us to it—are successful at bringing the computer to consciousness, then it *will* do things you could never do. Heck, it'll do things *I* could never do. Things I would never even dream of!"

"That's what scares me," muttered Hap.

After supper that night Trip sat in his room, staring at his tutor-computer. He hadn't booted it up since it hit him with that secret message the previous morning, and he was wondering—a little nervously—what he might find when he turned it on this time.

He was also wondering what Wendy had up her sleeve as far as *her* tutor went. She had been acting rather mysterious when she left headquarters early that afternoon, refusing to say anything other than "I have to go home and beat up on that electronic creep the government saddled me with."

Trip shrugged as he opened the rack attached to the machine. In a war between Wendy and one of these computers, he would bet on the Wonderchild every time.

He selected the tube marked "History," inserted it into the machine, and waited for the menu to appear.

When it did, he opted for the top choice: Ancient Civilizations.

"Hello. My name is Julius Caesar."

Trip stared at the monitor in astonishment. When he had chosen the history tube, he had expected to find no more than what his mother referred to, with great disdain, as an "electronic workbook"—the typical textbook-transferred-to-computer lessons where you were asked to read some material and then answer a few questions, and the only reason for doing it on a computer was because that was the current trend, not because the person who wrote the program had tried to take advantage of even a tenth of what the technology made possible.

That was what he had expected.

What he was seeing, and hearing, was a beautifully animated, highly accurate figure of Julius Caesar, explaining one of his adventures in the ancient world.

"Now, this is where we traveled during the First Gallic Campaign…"

Calling up a map of ancient France, the great general pointed out the area he would be moving his troops into, and explained the various dangers they were

already aware of.

Several large spots on the map were marked “Terra Incognita.”

Trip scanned the commands at the top of the screen, then pulled up a help function. Following the directions it displayed, he asked the computer to explain the strange phrase.

Immediately Caesar reappeared. *“Terra Incognita* means unknown lands—areas where we have no idea what to expect. They’re exciting, but potentially quite dangerous. Now, would you like to participate in this expedition?”

Trip switched on the voice recognition program, then replied, “Yes.”

“Good. Before we go on, you will need to make several decisions about how your expedition will be organized. Here are some of your choices…”

Caesar started by giving Trip a list of the available lieutenants and their character traits, then asking him to decide which men would best fit which assignments. Next he supplied the limits on what the men and animals could carry, then lists of the food and equipment Trip could choose to fill their packs.

“After you have made your selections, the priests will run a simulation of your campaign. This will allow you to compare your strategies to those Caesar himself would have selected.”

Trip noticed with amusement that this animated Caesar referred to himself in the third person, as a royal figure should.

“How many men will you lose?” continued Caesar. “How much territory will you gain? Soon the priests will tell us. May the gods be with you!”

Caesar gave Trip a wink, then disappeared from the screen.

He was replaced by a series of icons representing the choices Trip had to make: lieutenants, weapons, supplies, and so on. It was confusing at first. Included in the information on the available lieutenants was a list of the important people they were allied with in Rome. (Trip recognized many of the names, but only in the vague sense that they were historical figures he had heard of at one time or another.) And the troops and animals were all organized in units with Roman names. The help function came to his rescue several times here.

Because he had long been a fan of role-playing games, it was easy for Trip to immerse himself in the simulation aspect of this lesson. As he stared at the screen, trying to make wise decisions, he could feel his pulse begin to speed up in response to the pressure. After all, thousands of lives depended on his choices!

Finally he typed in a list of the officers he wanted. He moved on to choosing his supplies. When he had finished planning his campaign, he ordered the computer to run the simulation.

A moment later he groaned. A full-scale mutiny had erupted on the screen!

When the battle was over, Caesar returned, covered with bandages and shaking his head sadly.

“What went wrong?” asked Trip.

“You ignored the fact that an army is a team,” replied Caesar sternly. “Each of the men you selected was a good fighter. Unfortunately, the group as a whole was an explosive combination of opportunists and malcontents—superb soldiers with no loyalty to any cause but their own.” Caesar paused, then asked temptingly, “Care to try again?”

The question was hardly necessary. Trip had about as much chance of

quitting now as a moth has of turning away from a flame. When he finally stumbled to his bed, sometime well past midnight, his head was swimming and his arms ached from the hours at the keyboard. But if he was tired, he was also exhilarated. He had finally managed to out-think Caesar!

Along the way, and almost by accident, he had learned more about the Roman empire, Latin, military strategy, philosophy, mythology, and politics than he would have thought possible in a single evening—or even a single month.

He was asleep the instant his head struck the pillow. But all through the night he wandered the hills of ancient Rome, mighty Caesar at his side.

About the time Trip was tangling with Julius Caesar, Wendy was finishing her own "homework"—a project considerably different than refighting the Gallic Wars.

Humming to herself, the Wonderchild stretched a cord between her electronic tutor and the terminal that had been installed in her bedroom when she first arrived on Anza-bora.

"ADAM, meet Creepy," she said, as she moved from keyboard to keyboard, typing in commands and making adjustments. "I think you two are going to like each other. After all, you'll have a lot to talk about!"

When everything was finally ready, she typed the command "Test" on the electronic tutor. When the menu appeared, she pressed a key, then sat back and watched the two machines begin to interact.

Soon the nearby printer began spewing out pages of perfectly typed questions and answers.

"Way to go, ADAM!" cried Wendy. "I knew you were one smart computer!"

Satisfied that everything was functioning properly, she sat down at her workbench and removed the head from a stuffed frog she was trying to program to dance with another robo-doll, Mr. Pumpkiss. Reaching inside the toy's body with her micropliers, she began adjusting the circuits she had installed the day before.

She hummed as she worked.

It was kind of nice to have the most powerful computer in the world do your homework for you.

In the secret room beneath the Brain Cell, Black Glove was playing for higher stakes than mere homework. Typing a command, the spy waited nervously to see how ADAM would react.

When the computer had made no response at all after several minutes, the spy shrugged and tried again. When you were building a back door, there was no point in getting angry or trying to hurry. It had to be done slowly, with the utmost caution. And you had to expect a lot of setbacks; mistakes were part of the process.

The problem was, they were also dangerous, since a big one could get you caught.

Black Glove typed another command, a more daring one. Beads of sweat broke out on the spy's forehead. Would ADAM accept this one? Or would the computer rebel, claiming the command violated previous programming?

If the command was considered too outrageous, ADAM might even raise an alarm…

The moment of silence while the machine dealt with the input stretched into another… and another. Without realizing it, Black Glove stopped breathing.

Suddenly a message appeared on the monitor:

"Input accepted. Is there any more?"

Smiling triumphantly, Black Glove stepped away from the keyboard. Though this had been only a small step, in many ways it had been the most dangerous one. A single slip here might have alerted someone to what was going on.

How quickly things could change. This breakthrough meant the end of the struggle to sneak information off the island—and the end of worrying about those annoying kids!

In just one evening I've gotten past all that, thought the spy.

Much remained to be done. But the first link had been forged. Now, slowly, step by step, Black Glove would be able to bind the computer to his will as securely as a slave is bound to its master. The spy paused at the door to the secret room, halted by an astonishing thought. *I might not even need G.H.O.S.T. anymore*.

That was when the awesome truth struck home.

With the power I'll have when this computer is completely in my control, I won't need anyone. The entire world will be at my command!

The Doomsday Module

The next several days passed in relative peace and quiet. The gang continued to work on Sherlock, pouring information into the machine as fast as they were able.

"Do you suppose we're getting any closer to the Breakthrough Point?" asked Hap wearily after one particularly long and tiring session.

Roger shrugged. "Who knows? The whole thing is only a theory, after all."

"You mean we might be doing all this for nothing?" yelped Hap. "The computer might *never* break through to consciousness?"

"That's the way science works," said Rachel calmly. She took a sip of her coffee. "If you're trying to do something that's never been done before, how can you possibly be sure it's going to work?"

"I think I like motors better," said Hap. "They do what they're supposed to. Treat them right, they work right. Something goes wrong, you know where to fix it. No surprises."

"Sure," said Roger. "No surprises—and no excitement. Not to mention that the guys who figured out how to make motors work in the first place went through just this kind of process. Now, if we actually do hit the Breakthrough—"

He was interrupted by the Gamma Ray bursting into the room. "I just ran into Dr. Weiskopf!" he shouted. "Wait till you hear what he's working on now!"

"I don't want to know," said Hap. "After what we went through to get Euterpe into space, I don't care if I *ever* hear about one of his inventions again."

Euterpe was a robot. Dr. Weiskopf had designed it to calculate and coordinate the movements of satellites around the earth. Launching it had nearly cost Hap, Roger, and Rachel their lives.

Recalling that project, Roger was reminded of his occasional fear that Dr. Weiskopf might actually *be* Black Glove. Trying to sound casual, he said, "Did you guys ever wonder about Dr. Weiskopf?"

"What do you mean?" asked Rachel defensively.

Roger shrugged. "What if he tricked us into launching Euterpe just so he could get a transmitter into space?"

Rachel snorted. "If that had been the case, he wouldn't have had to wait until the last minute to try to sneak it on board the way Black Glove did. Besides, he doesn't have black hair. Heck, he hardly has any hair at all!"

"And he couldn't begin to squeeze those hands of his into that black glove Wendy's mother found," added Hap.

"I know, I know," sighed Roger. He shook his head. "This thing is making me so paranoid that sometimes I feel like we have to wonder about *everyone*—even the people who don't match the clues! But you're right; it couldn't be Dr. Weiskopf."

He didn't add that the main reason he couldn't convince himself that Dr. Weiskopf was Black Glove had nothing to do with their clues. The real reason was that he simply liked the man too much.

That's the problem with you, Phillips, he thought crankily. *You're too*

sentimental. If you like all the suspects, how are you ever going to finger one of them?

He shook his head. It was a question he had been wrestling with for months, without finding a satisfactory answer.

His thoughts circled back to Euterpe, and he found himself wondering how "the old bucket of bolts" was doing out in space.

In its orbit 22,300 miles above the earth, the object of Roger's curiosity was using its far-reaching sensors to gather information on the thousands of man-made satellites sharing the crowded Clarke Belt.

Processing that information, Euterpe worked it into a harmonious pattern that could prevent collisions, near misses, and even the kind of close passes that often caused radio interference. The pattern would be enormously useful, *if* Dr. Weiskopf could ever get the owners of those satellites (which in recent years had come to include scores of private companies) to accept his calculations.

Of course, Dr. Weiskopf knew that it was hardly likely the nations of the world would be willing to coordinate the orbits of the weapons satellites that were also jamming the skies.

What he did not realize was that there was no need to get anyone to accept his calculations. Before his robot had been launched, the spy Ramon Korbuscek had planted a small but powerful device called the "Doomsday Module" inside the rocket.

Given the right stimulation, that device could transform Euterpe's calculations into digitized radio signals. Using a highly guarded technology recently developed by one of Eastern Europe's top scientists, the module could then merge those signals with Euterpe's broadcast and send messages that would override the control programs of the satellites being monitored—allowing Euterpe, *or whoever controlled it*, to direct the movement of nearly every piece of hardware in the heavens!

The government that had hired Korbuscek to install the Doomsday Module had not yet learned that their agent had hurtled to his death while interfering with the first attempt to launch Euterpe. With Korbuscek dead and Anza-bora Island under a communications shield, they were not aware that their device had actually been installed and launched.

So for the moment the Doomsday Module was inactive, quietly circling the world while it waited for someone to bring it to life.

It would not have to wait much longer.

The gang was still discussing the Gamma Ray's report on Dr. Weiskopf's new project—a method to increase the computer's ability to receive and interpret sounds—when Wendy came strolling into the room. She had a sheaf of papers in her hand and an incredibly smug look on her face.

"Well, *I'm* done for the year," she said, dropping the papers onto the table.

"Done with what?" asked Trip, against his better judgment.

"My homework—*and* my tests. See?"

She fanned out the papers so the others could take a look.

Roger picked up a set that she had clipped together. "Mathematics: Test One" said the heading on the first sheet in the pile. "Score: 100." He flipped to the last page, which said, "Congratulations. You have completed the course in record time—and with a record high score."

He looked at the Wonderchild suspiciously. “How did you do this?”

“I cannot tell a lie,” said Wendy, grinning from pigtail to pigtail. “I did it with my little computer. And some help from my big computer.”

“You used the mainframe to do your homework?” asked Ray in astonishment.

“Yep,” said Wendy, barely able to contain her laughter.

“But that was cheating!” said Rachel indignantly.

“It was not! It was just a creative use of resources.”

“But you didn’t learn anything.”

“Actually, that’s not true. I learned scads about the computer. It wasn’t easy making the thing do what I wanted it to. I haven’t worked that hard in months!”

Hap chuckled. “You probably worked harder than if you had just learned the material and taken the tests.”

Wendy shrugged. “Could be. But I’m set for the rest of the year. I can keep using that program indefinitely—unless someone rats on me,” she added, glaring fiercely at Rachel.

“Come on, Wendy,” said Trip. “You know Rachel better than that.” At the same time he was recalling how much he had enjoyed the brilliantly prepared lessons he had been working through. *Should I tell her about that?* he wondered. *Nah. She’d only laugh at me. Besides, I know Wendy. She’d rather do it her own way*.

Thanksgiving came and went, feeling strange to the kids because of the reverse weather of the southern hemisphere. Other than a bizarre (but hardly unpredictable) incident with the mashed potatoes at the Gammand table, it was a quiet time.

That very quiet became worrisome. The gang began to fret because they had gone so long without detecting any sign of activity from Black Glove.

What was the spy up to?

Had he (or she) given up?

Or was there a new transmission device in place somewhere, causing unknown mischief?

The questions nagged at them. But try as they might, they could not pick up another clue.

At the same time they continued to work with the computer, concentrating especially on programming it with things that, for one reason or another, they thought might jog it into consciousness. It was on one of these late November mornings that Ray picked up a book from the stack Rachel was currently feeding through the optical scanner.

“The Bible?” he asked in astonishment.

“From Genesis to Revelation,” said Rachel with a nod. “I’m also putting in the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Sayings of Confucius, the Elder Edda, the—”

“Okay, okay, I get the point. But what for? I thought we just wanted to give the computer factual material.”

Rachel placed a book face down on the scanner and waited for the machine to take in the text. When the red light at the side of the scanner indicated it had “read” the material, she lifted the book, flipped the page, and repeated the process.

If she had been willing to cut the spines off the backs of the books it would have been possible to place the pages in a sheet-feed mechanism that would have

accomplished all this mechanically. But Rachel couldn't bring herself to perform the necessary mutilation.

"I'm not ignoring you, Ray," she said after a moment. "I'm just trying to figure out the best way to explain."

Roger crossed to join them. "Well, to begin with, we want to give the computer the necessary background to deal with other material we feed into it. Literature—even technical literature—is crammed with references to mythology and religion."

"Sure," said Trip. "Heck, the official name for the mainframe is straight out of the Old Testament."

Ray looked more confused than ever. "I thought ADAM stood for Advanced Design for Artificial Mentality."

"It does," said Rachel. "But they didn't pick that acronym without a reason. And the reason is that in the biblical version of creation, Adam was the first man—the first *thinking* being. That's why they decided to call the mainframe ADAM. They're trying to create the first of a new kind of thinking being, a new form of sentient creature!"

Ray looked a little nervous. "I never really thought of it that way. What happens if they succeed? Or if *we* do? Does that make us like gods?"

An uneasy silence settled over the room. No one seemed willing to answer Ray's question.

"I've been wondering about that kind of thing myself," said Hap at last. "To tell you the truth, sometimes I'm not so sure this whole thing is such a good idea."

"Well, it doesn't make much difference one way or the other," said Roger.

Hap looked at him questioningly.

"What I mean is, there's no way to stop it. You can't turn back an idea. If it doesn't happen here, it will happen somewhere else. If it doesn't happen this year, it will happen next year, or the year after. If you somehow got the whole world to forbid the creation of a sentient machine, the only thing that would do is ensure that when such a machine *was* finally invented, it would be by someone who didn't believe in following the rules."

It was only a matter of chance that Black Glove stumbled onto the strange log of radio transmissions. They came up during the run of a program that checked the computer's standard functions. The spy had been using it to make sure the latest attempts to build a back door weren't going to show up in some unexpected way and alert one of the project scientists to what was going on.

Among the functions the program checked was the reception and transmission of radio messages. Given the island's communications embargo, it was a utility that shouldn't be in use. Black Glove had expected ADAM simply to confirm its presence, then move on to the next utility.

So when the monitor displayed a notice that there were 845 messages on file, it caused the spy to stop and examine it more closely.

UTILITY: Radio Transmissions Received
There are 845 messages on file
Press R to read
Press N to move to next message

Press <Escape> to return to top of menu

When the probable explanation struck, Black Glove felt foolish for not having realized it at once. *It must be messages from Euterpe! I forgot we cleared a special channel to receive its broadcasts*.

Wondering if the long hours were starting to take their toll, the spy typed a series of commands that would make it possible to examine the data Euterpe was sending back.

Even after the information appeared, it took several moments for Black Glove to realize there was something strange about the transmissions. The spy stared at the screen, feeling something was slightly off, without being able to identify it. Then it hit. *There's too much! I'm getting more information than I should!*

Leather-covered fingers typed a new command; glittering eyes narrowed suspiciously at the response.

A possible answer—not nearly as simple or obvious as the initial realization that the radio transmissions were coming from Euterpe—began to nudge its way into Black Glove's mind.

Korbuscek.

Black Glove grinned. It *had* to be Korbuscek! Something the rival spy had done to the robot before it was launched was responsible for this situation.

Black Glove's mind began to race. If this involved Korbuscek, it had to be big.

A new idea presented itself. Though Black Glove first rejected it as too outrageous, it kept coming back:

Euterpe was designed to create orbits. But we had nothing on board that would allow it to actually implement those orbits. Could Korbuscek possibly have planted something that would let the robot control other satellites?

It would be easy enough to find out.

A new series of questions was fed into the computer.

The answers that came back made the unlikely suddenly seem quite possible.

Black Glove began to tremble. *If I can establish contact with whatever that fool planted on board the rocket…*

The spy pulled back from the thought. Korbuscek's device might allow whoever could use it to control virtually every nuclear weapon orbiting the earth. The idea of having *that* much power was almost too much to bear.

Almost.

But not quite.

The Outside World

"Mail call!" shouted Henry Swenson one day in early December as he staggered into the island canteen with a seven-day bundle of newspapers, magazines, and letters for his family.

Hap and his mother came running from behind the counter to dig through the pile. Since the Air Force supply plane landed on the island only once a week, news and mail from the outside world were a major event.

Mrs. Swenson cried out in pleasure as she found a letter from her sister. Tearing open the blue envelope, she plopped into one of the "ice-cream parlor" chairs to read it.

Hap latched on to the new issue of his favorite magazine, *Popular Technology*, which had a great-looking cover story on ten ways to soup up an electric dune buggy. *Right up my alley!* he thought, momentarily forgetting that Dr. Hwa's ban on the gang using any island vehicles was still in force.

Hap's father began leafing through the newspapers. Since the electronic shield created to secure the research being done on Anza-bora made it virtually impossible for unauthorized electronic transmissions to leave—or reach—the island, the weekly arrival of the news had become something of a ritual moment in Henry Swenson's life.

The brief tranquility of the scene was shattered when both Hap's parents cried out in disgust at the same time.

"Look at this!" said Mrs. Swenson angrily. She was holding up a sheet of paper marked with several large blotches. "Just look at it!"

"What is it?" asked Hap.

"A copy of my last letter to your aunt Sarah. She sent it back to show me how they censored it." She threw the page onto the table as if it offended her to touch it.

"Why did they do that?" asked Hap.

"Security," said his father, "The government doesn't much care what comes onto the island. But everything *leaving* it gets read by some jamoke in Washington before it goes on to its final destination."

"Why?" asked Hap again.

"To make sure it doesn't give away too much information. If they think something might give a clue to what's going on here—out it goes! Sometimes they get a little overzealous."

"Well, I say it's nonsense!" snapped Mrs. Swenson. "You'd think *I* was a spy or something."

"I wish it *was* nonsense," said Henry Swenson. "But considering what's going on out there, I think it might be justified." When his wife started to object, he thrust the newspaper he had been reading in her direction. "Take a look at this. We'll be lucky if the fools don't blow us to kingdom come before the year is over!"

Hap rose to read over his mother's shoulder. It was hard to tell who his father was talking about when he said "fools" in that tone of voice, since he thought all

members of the "Nuclear Club" were less than sane.

Hap felt his stomach knot up as he scanned the headline: SOUTH AMERICAN CONSORTIUM BREAKS OFF TALKS WITH UNIFIED KOREA—NEGOTIATORS EXPRESS CONCERN OVER ESCALATING HOSTILITY.

He sank slowly back into his seat. Moments like this sometimes made him think artificial intelligence might not be such a bad idea, after all. No matter how powerful a computer got, it probably couldn't do much worse than mankind was doing on its own. And it might do a whole lot better.

The darkening world situation seemed to dominate every conversation on the island for the next several days. An unpleasant tension settled over the scientists and their families as they wondered how close the two sides in the current conflict had come to taking a step from which there might be no return.

"If they actually do start a war, it could drag in dozens of other countries as well," said Dr. Phillips glumly one night at dinner.

From the look on his face he immediately regretted the words. It was not his desire to frighten his children.

But Roger and Rachel didn't need their father to tell them that even if the other nations of the world stayed out of things, the kind of nuclear battle the two countries involved might start could end up destroying the world's ecology for *everyone*, warmongers and peacemakers alike.

Rachel found herself lying awake at night wondering if the supply plane would ever come again—or if the outside world would blow itself to smithereens, leaving them stranded on Anza-bora with no word of what had happened.

She would have been doubly horrified to know that the root of the tension between the two powers was a series of signals originating right on Anza-bora—signals that were being received and processed by the robot she had helped launch!

"I am not going to let all this gloom and doom ruin Christmas!" Rachel announced suddenly one Saturday afternoon. She was sitting on Wendy Wendell's bed, watching the tiny blonde adjust the circuits in one of her automated dolls. Actually, Rachel was sitting less on the bed than on the heap of assorted stuff that covered it. The remarkable condition of the Wonderchild's room was one of the reasons Rachel didn't visit Wendy more often.

Wendy was well aware of this fact. It didn't offend her, since she could hardly stand the place herself.

Rachel's outburst caused the Wonderchild to look up from her work. "What are you talking about?" she asked, tucking a wire into place with a piece of solder so tiny it was almost invisible.

"Oh… everything!" said Rachel with a helpless gesture. "Everybody's so uptight around here, I'm afraid it's going to ruin the holidays."

"My parents aren't too big on holidays," said Wendy. "We've never done much about them."

"You're kidding!" cried Rachel, appalled at the idea of life without a great winter celebration.

Wendy shrugged. "My father says if you live right, every day is a holiday. It's a nice idea, I guess, though personally I don't think Dad actually pulls it off."

"I was thinking it might be fun to have a Christmas party at headquarters," said Rachel. "You know, some munchies, a few games, exchange gifts…"

Wendy set the doll on the floor. "Plastic people have more fun!" it said. It began to wander around the bedroom, picking itself up every time it stumbled over some debris.

"Well, it ain't perfect, but it's an improvement," said the Wonderchild.

"Wendy!"

"Oh, yeah. A party. Sounds like work to me. But look on the bright side. If our weekly ration of newspapers is any indication, you might not have to worry about it. I think the world's governments are planning a special fireworks display to celebrate the holidays this year."

"Fireworks?"

"Yeah. They're going to get together and blow up the planet."

The conversation seemed to go sour after that and finally Rachel left.

Roger was feeding information into Sherlock when Rachel came into the headquarters.

"Glad to see you, twin," he said cheerfully. "I was getting a little tired of doing this on my own. In fact, I'm about ready to take a break. Are you up for a three-way game of Aliens and Artichokes?"

"Just you, me, and the computer?"

"Can you think of better companions?" asked Roger with a grin.

Rachel smiled back and prepared to flex her brain.

They had been playing for nearly an hour when Roger said, "Sometimes I wonder if these games might not do as much to bring the computer to self-awareness as any of the things we're actually *expecting* to work on it."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I was thinking about that book we fed into it yesterday, the one about right-brain versus left-brain thinking. Almost everything a computer is asked to do is left-brain stuff—very statistical, very analytical. But some of these games really demand right-brain skills: intuition, logical jumps, that kind of thing." Rachel felt a little shiver in her spine. She looked at her twin for a long moment, then finally said, "Now that you mention it, I've had the feeling that the machine has been getting better at those things lately."

Roger nodded. "Me, too. That was what got me thinking about it. I wonder if true consciousness requires a development of both kinds of skills."

Rachel gestured toward the sign posted above the terminal. "Well, it probably does take a kind of intuitive jump to even think of saying *Cogito, ergo sum."*

The phrase, Latin for "I think, therefore I am," was something they had picked up from Trip Davis's mother. In fact, it had been one of their first clues to what Project Alpha was really all about. Now they used it as their motto: a quick way of referring to the kind of understanding both they and their parents were trying to create in ADAM.

"Well, *I* think it's time for a break," said a pleasant voice behind them.

"Hap!" cried Rachel. "We didn't hear you come in."

"I've been out enjoying the night. I came to see if anyone wanted to join me."

Rachel felt the tiniest hint of a blush tinge her cheek.

Roger looked from his sister to Hap, then back again. "Go ahead, Rach," he

said. “I’ve got some more programming I want to do.”

Rachel flashed her twin a grateful smile, then headed for the door.

“Romance,” said Roger when the room was empty again. “Phooey!”

He returned his attention to the computer. After another hour or so he grew weary of the work and decided to switch jobs. Crossing the room, he lifted the cushion from a dilapidated armchair to reveal a black glove, and a stack of file folders.

He examined the glove first, as he had so many times before. Smooth leather, a little worn; the size seemed about right for someone shorter than five feet seven. The only other mark on the glove was a slight bulge at the base of the second finger.

He was tempted to slip his own hand inside, in the bizarre hope that the glove might somehow communicate with him.

Roger snorted at himself for being so ridiculous. Anyway, his hand was too large for the glove. And he didn’t want to stretch it out. He was convinced that somehow it held the answer.

He sighed and allowed himself a momentary twinge of loneliness as he put down the glove and removed the folders from their hiding place. He would have been happier if his twin had stayed here to work with him, rather than opting for a walk in the moonlight with Hap.

“Oh, Roger,” called a voice to his left. “Can we go home now? I’m getting tired.”

Roger glanced at the bronze head sitting on a stack of papers at the end of the table. Sometimes he wished he had never started programming Paracelsus with specific messages to tease and annoy his sister. Rachel had turned the game around, and it was getting to be a pain in the neck.

“Roger, answer me!” demanded the automaton.

“No, we’re not going home! I’ve got too much work to do.”

He picked up the first folder on the stack. It was the top-secret personnel file for Dr. Bai’ Ling. Roger recognized that the odds on Dr. Ling being Black Glove were pretty slim. On the other hand, her folder was more fun to read than most of the others. And she did match their two clues…

“You are *not* taking very good care of me,” said Paracelsus. “I need my beauty rest, you know. I’ve a good mind to turn you over to the SPCA.”

“Will you shut up?” cried Roger. “And what’s the SPCA got to do with it? Wait! Wait! Forget I said that!”

It was too late. He had triggered the response mechanism.

“The SPCA,” said Paracelsus severely, “is the Society for the Prevention—”

“—of Cruelty to Automatons,” finished Roger, speaking in unison with the machine and cursing himself for falling into Rachel’s trap.

The simple solution, of course, would have been to shut off *this* automaton’s power source. But he always felt guilty when he did that—almost as if he was committing a murder.

Roger shuddered as he imagined the blast of contempt he would collect from his father if he ever admitted to *that* feeling!

He returned to the stack of files, which they had pulled from the main computer with a highly sophisticated password program written by the Wonderchild. He thought again how glad he was they had managed to print

them out before Rachel's unfortunate slip of the tongue a few months back had revealed the program's existence. Her disclosure had prompted Dr. Remov to write new security measures into the mainframe, making it impossible for them to continue using Wendy's program.

Roger had faith that, given time, the Wonderchild could crack the new security shields. But time was part of the problem right now. So he was just as glad they had these printouts—despite the fact that if anyone ever found out about them it would probably cause a crackdown that would make their recent session with Dr. Hwa look like a pep rally.

Impatient with his failure to solve the mystery, he set aside Dr. Ling's folder. It was one of the seven that made up their stack of "prime suspects"—people who:

(a) had been at the meeting where Rachel was bugged

(b) stood less than five feet seven inches tall

(c) had black hair.

He picked up the next folder, the one for Dr. Armand Mercury. He was leafing through the impressive list of Dr. Mercury's accomplishments when the main terminal began to beep.

I wonder who that is? thought Roger as he crossed to the keyboard. He was assuming, logically enough, that it was one of the gang, calling in with an important message.

He was wrong, and the unexpected words that scrolled up on the screen when he punched in the display code struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Roger and the Robot

Rachel took a deep breath. Though she missed the frosty air of home, December nights on Anza-bora were glorious. Filled with a tang of the ocean, the warm air seemed to carry hints and whispers of faraway places and adventures, dreams but vaguely glimpsed in the secret moments of the night.

The sound of the surf pounding against the shore only added to the effect. And when she looked up at the star-filled sky, the southern constellations so different from the ones she had grown up with, it was as if she had crossed a boundary into some other world.

Nights back in Cambridge had never held this much magic. There the lights of the city obscured the stars, and the air smelled more of people and cars than of ocean and waves.

She moved a step closer to Hap, enjoying the warmth of his presence. He leaned closer, and for a moment she thought he was going to put his arm around her.

The mood was shattered by the sudden appearance of Roger, racing down the road as if his tail was on fire.

Rachel groaned. She really wasn't interested in another emergency right now.

"Hey!" cried Hap. "Slow down, good buddy. What's going on?"

"I can't stop now!" panted Roger. "Follow me and I'll explain on the way. Damn Dr. Hwa for taking away our dune buggies anyway!"

And with that he was off.

Rachel glanced at Hap. He gave her the merest of shrugs, then sprinted away in pursuit of her brother. *Cripes!* she thought. *Here we go again!*

Enough of a realist to know complaining was useless, she took off after the boys.

"Where are we going?" she heard Hap pant as he drew abreast of Roger.

"Warehouse One. Our mysterious friend has called for an emergency meeting."

"Did he, or she, say what for?"

"Yeah. To tell us Black Glove's name!"

"Trap!" cried Rachel.

Roger skidded to a halt. "What?"

"This stinks worse than liver," said Rachel, thudding up beside him. She was holding her side, which was throbbing from the sudden exertion. "It's got to be a trap."

Roger swore. "I was so excited I didn't even think of that. But you're right—it does smell like a trap."

Hap sighed. "So now what do we do?"

"We keep going," said Roger. "Only we do it with a little more intelligence than I started out with. We can't afford to pass up the chance that this might be for real."

"We can't afford to get our butts caught in another trap, either," responded Hap. "Frankly I'm a little tired of risking my life for the general good and not

getting any thanks for it."

"Not *your* life," said Roger. "Mine. Our friend was specific—only one person goes in. And since I was stupid enough to be planning on it anyway, I should be the one to take the risk."

"Now wait a minute," said Hap. "You don't think we're going to let you go in there alone, do you?"

Roger smiled. "You don't have much choice. The safest way to do this is for the two of you to stay outside to cover me. If something breaks loose, try to get me out. If I don't come back in a reasonable amount of time, one of you go for reinforcements."

"Roger!" said Rachel.

"Yeah?"

Rachel looked into her brother's eyes, then shrugged. She knew him well enough not to bother trying to talk him out of this. She knew, too, that in his place she would do the same thing. It was one of the shared traits of their twinhood: Given a choice between caution and curiosity, they went for curiosity every time. If they had even the slightest chance of learning Black Glove's name, there was no way they were going to pass it up, not even if it meant real danger —or even worse, that they would miss the satisfaction of solving the puzzle.

"Yeah?" repeated Roger.

Rachel smiled at him. "Have fun."

And then they were off again.

The three youngsters crouched in the shadow of a scrub pine. About fifteen yards ahead of them, along a path mottled with moonlight and darkness, lay the entrance to the warehouse.

"Do you have a control panel with you?" whispered Hap.

"Right here," said Roger, patting his shirt pocket. Ever since he had learned to use the override device Wendy had designed to let them control the island's ferocious security robots, he had made it a point never to go out without one.

"I wonder if our mysterious friend is aware of those robots," said Rachel.

"I would expect so," said Roger. "It doesn't seem like there's much that goes on around here that he or she is *not* aware of. But our friend may also be planning on *me* putting it out of commission."

"We have to do everything!" said Hap.

It was hard to tell if he was disgusted, amused, or both.

"I think *do* is the operative word here," said Roger. "As in, I'd better get doing —which in this case means get moving."

With that he slipped away from them as silently as a bubble on a breeze.

Hap smiled in approval. He remembered how clumsy Roger had been at tailing people when they first met. They had spent a lot of time together to work on that skill since then. It was clear to Hap that his training efforts had not been wasted.

The same thought crossed Roger's mind as he moved from shadow to shadow, looking for any sign of danger. Yet even though his senses were hyper-alert, he had found nothing to indicate a trap by the time he reached the building.

Moving cautiously, he tried the door.

Locked, as he expected.

That was no real problem. The doors were sealed with a lock that was opened by a pushbutton pad located on the wall just to the left of the knob. You needed to know the combination to get in, of course. Either that, or you needed an electronic key like the one the Gamma Ray had developed with his father's help. (Roger often wondered if Dr. Gammand had any idea as to what kind of uses his son put the little "science projects" they worked on together.)

After taking the device from his pocket, Roger placed the cup-shaped sensor over the keypad, then waited for it to read the combination and play it back.

Fifteen seconds later the door swung open.

Roger stepped through, trying to move as soundlessly as possible. He patted the robot control unit again, just to make sure it was still in his pocket.

The warehouse was almost pitch black. The moon had disappeared behind a cloud, so even the skylight provided virtually no illumination. Only the dim red glow of the mandatory EXIT signs gave him a sense of space and direction.

Wishing he had taken the time to grab a real flashlight, Roger twisted the outer edge of his watch to activate the glow ring. The effect was minimal, but he could see enough to avoid running into things.

Looking ahead, he thought he saw a flash of light. He held his breath, waiting to see if it repeated itself.

There! That had to be their friend—or their enemy, if this was indeed a trap.

Suddenly Roger wished he had not been in such a hurry, after all.

Who was waiting for him in the darkness?

Moving slowly, silently, he began to work his way toward the light.

It flashed again, closer now.

Roger tried to swallow, found his mouth was too dry; his throat had closed up on him. He wondered if he would be able to talk—or cry out for help—when he came face-to-face with whomever he was approaching.

He took a few more steps, stopped when he saw the light flash—it was much closer now—then started again. Another flash and he could make out the dim outline of a short figure.

A shiver rippled down his spine. Black Glove was short. Could this be him?

Roger suddenly understood what it meant when someone said their blood ran cold. He felt as if his whole body had been plunged into ice water. Part of him wanted to turn and run. Another part, stronger, demanded he see this through. After all, Anza-bora had more than one short person

Now they were only a few feet apart. Suddenly the mystery person stopped. "No closer!" said a hoarse whisper. "Shine a light under your face. I want to see who you are."

Roger hesitated for an instant. It had not occurred to him that their friend might be as nervous as he was. "I don't have a very good light," he said softly. "See if this—"

He was interrupted by a hideous shrieking. Tearing out of the dark, splitting the silence, it froze him where he stood. It took only an instant to realize it was coming from one of the guard robots.

"Don't worry!" he called, fumbling for the control unit. "I can take care of this."

But their mysterious friend had already slipped into the darkness.

"At least tell me who Black Glove is!" cried Roger. Then the robot came

roaring around a corner just ahead of him, and he had to turn his attention to the problem at hand. Nothing fancy required here—no need to make the robot do anything but stop in its tracks.

He pushed the appropriate button.

Nothing happened.

He pushed it again, then screamed.

The scream was involuntary. The robots were designed to inspire fear. Even when you knew what they looked like, the sight of one of them racing down on you out of the darkness, its red eyes flashing, its demonic face lit with a hellish glow, was enough to scare the bravest man.

Roger tried the button one more time, then every other button on the control panel.

Nothing happened.

He tossed the panel aside and ran for his life.

The robot was faster. In seconds it was close enough for several of its tentacles to come snaking out and grab him. Closing around his arms, they snatched him off the floor.

Roger's scream of terror was almost loud enough to drown out the sound of his bones snapping in the robot's grasp.

The Severed Connection

When Roger opened his eyes, he saw the concerned face of Dr. Celia Clark peering down at him. Her thick braid of chestnut hair, dangling past her prominent nose, came perilously close to tickling his ear.

Is she our secret friend? he thought in astonishment.

Suddenly he realized that he was no longer in the warehouse. He tried to move, then shouted in pain as a lance of fire shot up his arm.

"You're lucky you were still unconscious when I set it," said Dr. Clark softly. "The effect of bones being snapped back into place can be downright nauseating."

Roger looked down and groaned. His right arm was encased in a pristine plastic cast. "What happened?" he asked weakly.

Dr. Clark smiled. "You had a close encounter of the worst kind with one of Sergeant Brody's robots." Roger dropped his head against the bed as the events of the evening began drifting back into his memory. The movement made him wince as another bolt of pain shot along his arm and into his shoulder.

"How bad is it?" he asked, nodding toward the cast. Dr. Clark shrugged. "Multiple fracture of the wrist, lower radius, and ulna. A few years ago you might never have played piano again. But with the new marrow-enrichment techniques, it just means you'll be slowed down for a while."

"Well, I'm glad I'll be able to play the piano when this comes off," said Roger, who was never able to resist a joke, no matter how old. "I never could before!"

Dr. Clark smiled. That was exactly the reaction she had been hoping for. While it was clear to her trained eye that her patient was still in shock, it was also obvious that the trauma in the warehouse had not driven him into a shell, as she had feared it might.

Roger heard angry voices in the hall outside. He recognized one as his father's.

"What's going on out there?"

Dr. Clark glanced at him as she inserted a long needle into a vial of clear liquid. "I think your father's having a fit. Brace yourself. This won't hurt long."

"What is it?" asked Roger, eyeing the needle nervously.

"Painkiller," replied Dr. Clark as she plunged the needle into his shoulder.

"Ouch! How's it supposed to work—by making my shoulder hurt so much I forget my arm?"

"Don't be cranky. If you had been at home minding your own business, none of this would have happened to begin with."

Roger was working on a suitable response when Rachel poked her head through the door. "Can we come in?"

Dr. Clark nodded, then turned to busy herself cleaning up some equipment. Hap and Rachel slid into the room and came to stand by Roger's side.

"How is it?" asked Rachel, nodding toward his arm.

"Sore."

Rachel's response was interrupted by another outburst from the corridor.

"Boy, your dad is really on a rampage," said Hap. "He's chewing Hwa and Brody up one side and down the other."

Roger grinned.

"Don't get too cocky," said Rachel. "I think we're next—and that includes you, O wounded warrior. He is not a happy pappy." Leaning closer to him, she whispered urgently, *"So did you find out who it is?"*

Roger shook his head. "We were interrupted before we even started to talk." He glanced around. "How did I get here, anyway?"

Hap looked grim. "As soon as that robot started screaming, or whatever you call that noise they make, we came running into the warehouse."

"Both of you?"

"Of course!" said Rachel.

Roger shook his head. "That wasn't the plan…" His voice trailed off as he caught the haunted look in Hap's eyes. He could almost read the thoughts going through his friend's mind: *I should never have let him go in there alone. I should have been with him*.

"Hap," he said firmly. "Listen to me: Other than the fact that it might be you lying here now instead of me, it would not have made a bit of difference if you had been there. And since you're the best physical specimen we have, it's just as well it was me anyway. So drum that crap about guilt out of your head right now, okay?" He stared into Hap's eyes, willing him to understand that what he had just said was true.

The moment of tense silence was broken when Hap shrugged and said, "Okay, I believe you."

He didn't entirely, of course. But he felt better for what his friend had said.

"Then go on with the story," said Roger.

"There's not too much more to tell," said Rachel. "About the time we hit the door every light in the place came blazing on, and Brody came rushing in with some of his men."

Hap actually smiled. "You should have seen the look on the sarge's face! I think he figured he had caught some real desperado. Then he spotted you hanging from that robot's arms looking like you were dead, and he knew he was going to end up in the soup one way or another. His jaw almost hit the floor."

Roger laughed.

"It wasn't quite so funny at the time," said Rachel solemnly. "I didn't know what shape you were in, either."

Roger winced at the pain in his sister's voice.

"But you should have heard her after she figured out you were still alive," said Hap proudly. "I'm surprised she didn't blister Brody's skin right off him. 'Mindless brute' and 'gutter-crawling slime bag' were the *nicest* things she had to say."

"I was upset," said Rachel, blushing a little.

"What I can't understand is why this happened to begin with," said Roger. "I checked the battery in that robot control unit just two days ago. There's no way it should have been down so soon."

"The battery didn't fail you," said Rachel. "They changed the robot's programming."

"Wonderful," said Roger. "I was a victim of technology. How did you find that out?"

"We heard it while the grown-ups were yelling at each other," said Hap.

"Dr. Hwa's dragging out everything he can think of to try to quiet Dad

down," added Rachel, by way of explanation. "It turns out that after Wendy commandeered the whole fleet of robots during the Euterpe caper, Brody decided something *had* to be done."

Hap chuckled. "The sarge couldn't stand the idea of *us* telling *his* robots what to do."

"Never mind the fact that if she *hadn't* been able to do that, I'd be an orbiting corpse right now," said Rachel. She made a sound of disgust. "If Brody worried as much about real security problems as he worries about us, this island would be a lot better off."

"Sergeant Brody is a meathead," said Dr. Clark, who had been listening to the last part of this. "You kids are nice and visible, so he spends his energy on you. The idiot wouldn't know a real spy if he fell over one." She walked back to the examination table where Roger was lying and held out a white tablet. "Here. Take this."

"What is it?"

Dr. Clark sighed. "I sometimes think if I ever have children I would prefer the kind who are so stupid it never occurs to them to ask questions. This is a newly synthesized hormone that will make your bones knit faster. Do you want it? Or would you prefer to live with your cast for a full six weeks?"

"I was just curious," said Roger, reaching for the tablet.

"So was Alice. And look where it got her: stuck down a rabbit hole."

"True," conceded Roger. "But she had a lot of fun along the way. Besides, Alice will live forever."

"I sincerely doubt that you will be so lucky," replied the chestnut-haired scientist. "In fact, at the rate you're going, I would consider making it through to the end of the year a real victory. Now take your pill. I've got work to do."

With that, she spun on her heel and disappeared through a door at the back of the treatment room.

Roger looked at the tablet and wondered vaguely if Dr. Clark might be the spy, and was using this as a way to kill him off.

Stop being paranoid! he ordered himself. *Besides, she's too tall and has the wrong color hair.*

He tossed the pill into his mouth and turned to Rachel. "So just what did they do with the robots?" he asked, returning to the original question.

"They gave them to ADAM."

"Say what?"

"They worked out some device so that the robots only respond to commands issued by the main computer—via shortwave radio broadcasts, of all things. Brody's control panels send a message to the computer, then the computer verifies it before issuing the command to the robots."

"Well, that system shouldn't be too hard to break," said Roger. "After all, we're on pretty good terms with ADAM ourselves."

Rachel shook her head. "Not this good. Every morning the computer randomly generates a new fifteen-digit number, which is given to the *official* control units by plugging them directly into the mainframe. Only units first broadcasting that number get a response from the computer."

Roger shook his head and gave a low whistle. "Fifteen digits! That's a quadrillion possible access codes! They're really getting nasty, aren't they?"

"Not nearly as nasty as I feel," said Dr. Phillips, stepping into the room.

Roger groaned. His father's face had *lecture* written all over it.

While Dr. Phillips was expressing his opinion of the evening's activities, the person the gang had come to think of as "MF" (for "Mysterious Friend") huddled in a steaming shower and tried to stop trembling. What a close call that had been!

The trembling was not caused solely by fear. News of Roger's mishap had reached the MF through the island communications system. With it had come a heavy burden of guilt.

I shouldn't have left him!

Turning off the shower, the damp figure grabbed a large, thick towel. *But I really did believe the kids had the robot situation under control. Otherwise I wouldn't have taken off as I did!*

MF sighed. Pleasant as it would have been to believe that, it really wasn't true. Capture at this point was unthinkable, and no matter how appalling it might be, the fact was that the mission took precedence over the life of a single teenager. The world had too much at stake to let sentimental concern for an individual stand in the way of what had to be done.

That may be. But it's still important that I alert the kids to the identity of the enemy before I leave the island tomorrow. That communications blackout may have slowed down Black Glove, but it's certainly made my job harder, too. And they're the only ones who can keep an eye on things until I get back.

For probably the tenth time in as many days the gang's unknown friend made a mental note to find out who had left Sergeant Brody in charge of security for Anza-bora Island. *Whoever it was, I'll have the nitwit's head on a platter when this is all over!*

Then MF stretched out on the bed and began a series of relaxation exercises. A little sleep was a necessity right now. Tomorrow was going to be a real challenge.

"So, what did your father have to say?" asked Wendy the following afternoon, when the group had once again gathered at their headquarters.

"It would be easier to tell you what he left out," said Roger with a sigh. "Which was basically nothing. I'm thinking of contacting the *Guinness Collection of Records* to see if I can get dad listed in their next edition for having made the longest nonstop lecture ever given to a kid."

"My circuits are still in a jangle," said Paracelsus.

"I can't believe I missed all the action," said Trip. "I wish I'd been there!"

"Forget it," said Hap. "This was not one of your all-time fun evenings. Other than having your parents decide to cancel your freedom to ever leave the house again as long as you live, I doubt your presence would have changed much."

Trip sighed. It wasn't easy being the most "protected" kid in the group.

"Don't feel bad," said Roger. "You're not the only one on a short leash. My father's on the verge of canceling my right to breathe."

"My parents told me how pleased they were that I was home in bed where I belonged," said Ray, sounding disgusted. "I thought I was going to throw up."

"You have to train them better, Ray," said the Wonderchild. "Now, in my case __"

She was interrupted by the buzzer that indicated a message coming in on the computer.

"This should be interesting," said Rachel. "Everybody who's supposed to know the direct access code for that terminal is already here. So it's got to be either our mysterious enemy—or our mysterious friend!"

It turned out to be the latter..

"Greetings," said the message that appeared on the monitor. "First, my apologies for last night. I thought you had the robot situation under control."

"So did we," said Roger ruefully. As he spoke, he adjusted the sling that held his cast-laden arm in place.

"Quiet!" said Hap. "I want to read this."

The computer continued to print the message word by word—an indication that it was being typed even as they read it.

"I called for that meeting because I didn't want to take the risk of sending this message over the computer. Unfortunately, as it turned out, my alternative was no improvement. I still don't like doing this; you can never be sure someone won't intercept it. But now I have no choice. I must leave the island almost immediately, and it is vital that you keep an eye on Black Glove until I return.

"However, it is equally vital that you DO NOT make a move unless a major emergency arises!

"You will understand why when I tell you that Black Glove's real identity is __"

Suddenly the flow of words ceased. An instant later a burst of letters and symbols exploded across the screen, as if someone had slammed their fists against the keyboard.

"Chips!" exclaimed Wendy. "Now what?"

"Get on that keyboard, Rachel!" cried Roger, seething with frustration because he couldn't do it himself. "Put a trace on that transmission."

Rachel was already calling up the program they had been developing to track down some of their mysterious messages. But it was too late. The connection had been severed.

The Traitor

Less than an hour after the transmission from their mysterious friend had been so strangely interrupted, the A.I. Gang could be found gathered outside the door to Dr. Hwa's office.

"At least *his* message was complete," said the Gamma Ray, speaking of the summons that had brought them here. "Even so, I wish it had been a little more specific. We've had enough little mysteries in the last few days."

"Well, the fastest way to find out what the good doctor wants is to ask," said Roger. Without further hesitation, he pushed open the door and stepped in.

To his surprise, one of Sergeant Brody's air police was slouched in the chair behind Bridget McGrory's desk.

"He'd better not let Bridget catch him there," whispered Wendy. "If she does they'll be able to use what's left of him for meat loaf tonight."

The guard barely looked up from the book he was reading. "Go on in. The boss is waiting for you."

As they filed into Dr. Hwa's office, Ray lingered for a moment to see if the guard would reach under the desk, as he had seen Bridget McGrory do on several occasions. While the movement had always seemed suspicious to him, he had admitted to himself that she might simply be releasing an electronic lock of some kind, or doing something else equally innocent.

But the guard was completely absorbed in his book; he didn't move at all.

Scratch the electronic lock theory, thought Ray, following the others into Dr. Hwa's sanctum sanctorum.

The little scientist was sitting behind his desk, studying a thick file of papers. An atypical clutter covered the rest of the surface. In fact, an air of disarray seemed to have descended over the entire office—right down to Dr. Hwa himself. The scientist's usually neat hair was rumpled, his tie askew, his lab coat only half buttoned.

He didn't look up until Roger cleared his throat to indicate that they were waiting for him. When he did, his face appeared drawn and weary, as if he had not slept for many hours. "Have a seat," he said, gesturing to the large conference table on the other side of the room.

The gang exchanged uneasy glances. In their numerous interviews with Dr. Hwa he had rarely invited them to sit. When he did, it was generally a sign of something big.

"Please," said Dr. Hwa, rising from his chair and coming around the desk to join them. "Have a seat." They let him lead the way to the conference table. When he had taken his place at the head of the table, they sat three on either side of him, eager to discover what came next.

"This is hard for me," said Dr. Hwa.

He locked his fingers together and stared into the little cave made by his hands. The gang, even Wendy, remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

Finally he looked up. "I do not make many mistakes. However, I now find that when I do make one, it is—to use an appropriate Americanism—a dilly." He

turned to look directly at Roger. “I owe you an apology,” he said, his eyes straying to the cast on Roger’s arm. “And the rest of you, as well, though it is Roger who has suffered most recently, and most severely, as a result of my disbelief.” He sighed. “Please accept my sincere regrets for having ignored your warnings.”

A look of puzzlement passed among the gang. What was going on here?

“You spoke to me of a spy,” said Dr. Hwa. “I would not listen. Now I find, to my dismay, that there was indeed an agent on Anza-bora who was hostile to my interests. Worse, it was someone I trusted as I would have trusted my own parents.”

He sighed and stared into his hands again.

“Well, who the heck was it?” cried Wendy.

When Dr. Hwa looked up, his face seemed twisted with sorrow. “Your mysterious Black Glove has turned out to be my secretary, Bridget McGrory. We caught her red-handed, so to speak. She has been going through classified files in my desk.”

He sighed. “I have not felt so betrayed since… well, that was a different time and place. Suffice it to say that this discovery has pained me more than I can tell you.”

“I can’t believe old Bridget had it in her,” said Hap when the gang had gathered in their headquarters to digest this latest piece of news.

“Watch it, bub,” said Wendy. “That comes perilously close to being a sexist remark. Bridget McGrory is one tough cookie. I bet she can do just about anything she puts her mind to. And don’t forget that Ray’s been babbling for months now about some mysterious move she makes at her desk whenever we go in to see Dr. Hwa. We should have paid more attention to what he was saying.”

“Thanks,” said Ray. “I think. I *was* getting tired of all of you acting like I had several screws loose when I said there was something strange about her. My theory is, she was switching on a remote recording device or something like that.”

“I feel silly for not having figured it out ourselves,” said Rachel. “I think I ignored her because she was ‘just’ a secretary!”

“I’ll tell you one thing,” said Roger. “I’d like to get a chance to talk to her. I’ve got a lot of questions about what’s been going on here for the last several months, and she might be able to answer them.”

“Well, she’ll be here for a while,” said Trip. “Dr. Hwa said they were going to ship her out on the next supply plane. But the plane was here just yesterday, so it will be another six days before they can send her off island.”

“What difference does that make?” asked Hap. “They’re not about to let *us* in to see her.”

“So?” asked Wendy. “We haven’t let that kind of thing stop us yet, have we?”

“Why, no,” said Roger, with a widening smile. “I can’t say as we have. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“If I’m not, you’re dumber than I thought,” said Wendy.

Rachel sighed. “Oh, great. Most people want to break out of jail. Now we’re going to try to break *into* one? That should do wonders for our reputation!”

“It’s not like we’re going to try to get right into her cell,” pointed out Wendy.

“Just up to the door of it, so we can talk to her.”

“But how are we going to do it?” asked Trip. “Now that the robots are back in Brody’s control, we can’t just walk into the place.”

“So we’ll have to find some other way,” said Wendy. “I’ve done my part; I got the brilliant idea to begin with. Why don’t the rest of you figure out how to pull it off?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Trip. “Let’s put the question to Sherlock. This will be a good test for him.”

“If you’ve made that machine smarter than I am, I’m going to be very jealous,” said Paracelsus.

“Hey, baby,” said Wendy, patting the automaton’s shiny skull. “You gotta roll with the punches. Now be quiet, or we’ll take you apart and make transistor radios out of you.”

“Call the SPCA!” shrieked Paracelsus.

“Don’t even ask,” said Roger, before Wendy could open her mouth. “Just ignore him.”

“Well, I like that!” said Paracelsus. Then the automaton shut off its own circuits and went to sleep.

“This was harder than I thought,” said Trip after the gang had spent nearly fifteen hours of programming and careful questioning to get Sherlock to come up with an answer. “But I think he’s ready.”

“How come it took so long?” asked Hap. “Sherlock figured out that code for where the transmitter was located in almost no time.”

“Different kind of question,” said Roger. “Different thought processes. Ready, everyone?”

When the gang had gathered around, Roger said, “Sherlock, what are your conclusions?”

“Find out the robot’s patrol schedule,” replied the computer in its crisp British accent. “Then either try to slip in when there is a brief break, or else use the knowledge of where the guard will be to prepare a distraction.”

Ray snorted. “This is not a fifteen-hour answer! I worked out the same strategy yesterday.”

“Yes, but you were operating from a base of common sense,” said Rachel.

“Tell that to my parents! They don’t think I have any.”

“Well, they may not agree,” said Rachel. “But the truth is, common sense is a heck of a lot easier to come by in a person than in a machine. Remember that guy who spent a year trying to program a computer so it would know enough to come in out of the rain?”

“Wait a minute,” said Hap. “Why was it out in the rain to begin with?”

Rachel made a, face “It wasn’t really out in the rain, silly. It was a simulation program. The researcher set up the situation, then asked the computer what it would do.”

“If it didn’t know, why didn’t he just tell it?”

“Because he wanted the machine to figure it out on its own! That was the whole point. As it turned out, teaching a machine to add and subtract is a snap compared to teaching it to do the kind of things we take for granted.”

“Enough theory,” said Trip. “The question now is whether or not we take

Sherlock's suggestion. If we do, we've still got to get the robot's patrol schedule."

"It's probably in the main computer," said Hap. "Do you think we can pull it out?"

"I expect so," said Wendy. "I'm guessing they hardly bothered to protect it, since they would figure they had already taken care of security with their access code plan. I bet I can find it without much trouble."

"I hope so," said Rachel. "We've only got four days before the supply plane lands and Bridget is gone for good. If we're going to talk to her, we've got to move fast."

"I'll start on it right away," said Wendy.

"Good," said Roger. He lifted his arm to glance at his watch, realized that he was wearing a cast instead, and moved his attention to his other wrist. "I have to be at the infirmary for a check on my arm in fifteen minutes. I'll leave this in your capable hands."

"Aye-aye, Chief," said Wendy, snapping him a salute. "Come on, Ray. I can use your help on this one."

To Roger's surprise, the infirmary was empty when he arrived.

"Dr. Clark?" he called, standing at the door to her office.

That's funny. She's usually right on time. I wonder if anything is wrong.

He called again.

Still no answer.

He stepped in and looked around. The office was empty. Walking through it, he entered the examination room, where he took his usual place on the high-topped table.

Several minutes went by. After a while Roger got up and began to poke through the equipment arrayed on the shelves. *I wonder when they'll invent an electronic tongue depressor*, he thought, looking at a jar of wooden strips. He took one out and clenched it between his teeth, plucking the end so it made a strange vibrating sound.

Where is she, anyway?

Making another circuit of the room, Roger noticed that the door in the back wall was slightly ajar. He pushed on it, and it swung open.

"Dr. Clark?" he called.

Again, no answer. He was about to pull the door shut when he noticed a strange odor drifting through from the other side. Curious, he stepped into the next room. What he saw there made him feel as if his world had turned upside down.

Project Alpha was a high-tech *hardware* operation.

So what were all these rows of tanks filled with bubbling yellow water and something that looked disturbingly like flesh?

He stepped closer to one of the tanks to examine it.

"Roger!" cried a horrified voice. "What are you doing in here?"

He spun around and winced in pain as his cast smashed into a tank.

"Dear God!" cried Dr. Clark. As she rushed forward the tank tottered on its stand, then began tipping slowly forward.

Halfway around the globe a Russian soldier named Leonid Chernekov stared in horror at the computer screen it was his job to monitor. After a moment he

shook his head in disbelief and retyped the command, assuming he would get a more sensible response. This time he checked the key sequence carefully before pushing the Enter key.

To his dismay, the results were identical to the last time.

Chernekov was not a man to panic. He began a series of tests designed to spot 99.9 percent of the malfunctions possible in the computer.

When every one of them came up negative, Chernekov felt a cold fear begin to grow in his stomach. He summoned a superior, who listened to his story, tried a few tricks of her own, and then summoned *her* superior.

This third person, the second-highest-ranking officer and the most knowledgeable computer specialist on the base, had no more luck than his underlings in getting the computer to provide a readout that made sense.

Chernekov began to tremble.

This was not an unreasonable reaction. The discovery that two of your country's largest nuclear warheads have shifted in their orbits and are entering a pattern that would put one of them in line for a direct hit on Washington, D.C., and the other for a direct hit on Moscow, would be enough to make any soldier a little shaky.

Looking at the possibility that the world is about to end tends to do that to people.

Brain Work

Dr. Clark was sprawled on the floor in a most undignified manner. The front of her lab coat was covered with splashes of bilious yellow. A puddle of the same yellow fluid was soaking into her jeans. But in her arms was the tank that Roger had nearly destroyed. Better yet, its fleshy contents were safe inside its glass walls, rather than splattered across the floor, as had seemed inevitable until Dr. Clark had sped to intercept its fall.

From the look on her face, it was clear that it was only the fact that she had managed to keep the tank and its contents from being destroyed that was keeping her from splattering Roger across the room as well.

"Give me a hand, will you?" she snapped after a moment.

Roger reached out awkwardly with his good arm. Dr. Clark began to laugh at the absurdity of her own request, dropping her head against the edge of the tank.

"Never mind," she said. "I'll manage somehow." Sliding the tank off her legs, she got to her feet, groaning slightly as she did. She brushed herself off and tried to assess the damage—both to herself and to the experiment.

"Well, it's not as bad as it could have been," she said, pushing her hand against the small of her back. She hoisted the tank off the floor and positioned it carefully on the rack. "Now, what are you doing in here?"

Before Roger could answer, Dr. Bai' Ling appeared at the doorway. Roger swallowed. His gift of gab always seemed to fail him when he was face-to-face with the gorgeous scientist.

Dr. Ling surveyed the situation and made a comment that old-fashioned men would have found inappropriate coming from such an angelic face. Roger smiled. The vulgarity made Dr. Ling seem a bit more human, a bit less of a goddess.

"Are you all right?" she asked Dr. Clark, once her initial reaction had faded.

"I think so. I don't know about Harvey, though. The best I can say right now is that he's in one piece."

Roger took it that "Harvey" was the chunk of flesh inside the tank he had nearly destroyed. Before he could ask about it, Dr. Ling turned to him and demanded, "What are you doing in here, anyway?"

"I was looking for Dr. Clark," said Roger. "We had an appointment." He touched his cast, as if that would explain things.

"My fault," said Dr. Clark, with a sigh. "Or at least partially. I neglected to lock the door. Of course," she added, staring icily at Roger, "if people would stay where they belong, locks wouldn't be necessary."

"Hey, look, I'm no threat to the free world. In case you forgot, I got this broken arm trying to crack the spy case on this island."

A few days ago that statement would have gotten him nowhere. But with the uproar over the arrest of Bridget McGrory still in full swing, it was a potent argument.

Dr. Clark relented. "I'm sorry, Roger. I tend to be very protective of my work."

"I'm sorry, too," said Roger, realizing he hadn't managed to apologize for his

clumsiness yet. “And I don’t blame you for getting upset. I feel awful about damaging your experiment. It was just that you startled me when you came up behind me.” He turned his gaze toward the tanks. “I hope I didn’t damage the circuit growth.”

It was a shot in the dark, of course; he didn’t have the slightest idea what the experiment was actually about. But getting people to correct his “mistakes” had long been one of Roger’s most effective tactics for gathering information.

“No circuits,” said Dr. Ling, peering wistfully into the tank. “Synapses. We’re working on a biocomputer.”

“Edelman technique?” asked Roger, grabbing a name out of thin air.

Dr. Ling frowned. “This is all our own work. We haven’t borrowed ideas from anyone!”

“Well, that’s not entirely true, Bai’,” said Dr. Clark, lifting a jug of yellowish liquid and pouring it into the tank. “Browning and Keppel had some of the same ideas we’re working from.”

“Yes, but they didn’t *begin* to develop them,” said Dr. Ling defensively.

Roger listened happily. Getting two adults to disagree was his second favorite method for gathering information.

This argument turned out to be a bonanza. By the time it was finished his head was spinning with information, and he was itching to get back to share it with the others.

But first he had to get his arm checked, and his hormone injection.

Rachel was feeding the last page of *Huckleberry Finn* (Hap’s suggestion) into ADAM’s memory banks when a shout of triumph drew her attention. Raising her head, she saw Ray jump up from his terminal and begin dancing about the room.

“Have a minor success?” she asked, grinning at his antics.

“Nothing much,” said Wendy, who was reacting more sedately to their breakthrough. “Just a complete listing of the patrol schedules for Brody’s robots.” She smiled, then added slyly, “Oh—we also happened to stumble across the program that generates their daily fifteen-digit security code.”

Rachel whooped in delight. “You’re *kidding!* You mean we can get control of the things again?”

Wendy shrugged. “It’ll take a little work, but I think so. It’s pretty funny; they set up the actual listing of the daily code so there’s no way you can get at it—at least, no way that we could find. But if you just tap into the generation program itself, you can start at the top and work your way down through it to the daily number. It’s a typical programming glitch. They’ll probably figure it out and correct it the first time we use the control devices again.”

“Once we’ve talked to Bridget we shouldn’t *have* to use them again,” said Ray, who had stopped leaping about and decided to join the conversation. “The case is closed. This is just a mop-up for the sake of our own curiosity.”

Rachel frowned. She knew she should be relieved that the gang had finally been proved right about the spy. But she wasn’t. Something about the whole thing bothered her. Hap had suggested it was a simple case of letdown. They had spent months trying to nail Black Glove, and after all their work, it had been Brody who had cracked the case. Granted, it had been dumb luck on the sergeant’s part. (“What other kind would he have?” Wendy had cracked.) Even

so, it was particularly galling to have their rival succeed where they had failed.

She had tried to compensate for the letdown by throwing herself into the programming. It was, after all, the real task at hand. But somehow it wasn't quite as interesting as it had been.

She sighed. She supposed she would get over it after a while. It just seemed funny to have the person who had been such an untiring enemy locked up so quickly.

Her brooding was interrupted by Roger bounding through the front door, shouting, "Have I got a hot bit of news for you guys!"

Jonathan Campbell, special aide to the President of the United States, was not about to go bounding through the doors of the Oval Office. Even if it had not been wildly inappropriate, he was in no hurry to get his boss's reaction to the news he had been given to carry to him. Instead of bounding, he took a quiet moment to brace himself for the storm he expected to hit as soon as the President read the report that he, Jonathan, now clutched in his sweating hands.

No sense putting it off any longer, he told himself finally. Taking a deep breath, he walked into the Oval Office, dropped the report on the President's desk, then watched with interest as the great man picked it up and began to flip through it.

The President's eyebrows began to creep up his forehead as he turned the pages. Soon he was no longer scanning but reading carefully, word by boggling word. After a few minutes he put the report down and stared into the room ahead of him, ignoring Jonathan as if he wasn't there.

"What in blue blazes are those maniacs up to?" he muttered at last.

He picked up a red phone, prepared to call his counterpart in South America, when another aide rushed into the room, crying "Mr. President!"

"Just a minute," said the President. "I'm making a call."

"But, Mr. President—!"

"Listen, you young fool," roared the President. "The South American Union is moving its space defense system around as if they were playing dominoes. They've got a whole arsenal trained on our capital, another on Beijing, a third on Moscow—and another one on Rio de Janeiro! I want to know what's going on, I want to know why, and I don't want to spend time chatting with you when I could be finding out! Now, do you have something more important that I should know?"

"Yes, sir, I do," said the aide. "The Russian missiles are doing pretty much the same thing. And…" The aide paused uncomfortably.

"And *what*?" shouted the President. "Spit it out!"

"Our own missiles have been moved into the same configuration."

The President's eyebrows nearly shot off the top of his head. *"At whose orders?"*

The aide wrung his hands. "No one knows! They seem to be moving on their own."

It was the first time Jonathan Campbell had ever seen his leader speechless.

"Synapses?" asked Trip Davis incredulously.

Roger nodded in confirmation. "You should see it in there. They've got vats of this yellow glop, with big chunks of brain matter growing inside!"

"What's the point?" asked Wendy.

"It's an alternative system. Dr. Clark was the one who got the idea. She was trying to figure out why a human brain could hold so much information, and she decided the answer might have to do with the fact that a lot of what happens in the brain is chemical as well as electrical—a double system, so to speak. She got talking to Dr. Ling about it, and they decided to clone some brain cells to try to create a storage system."

"The wonders of technology," said Wendy. "From floppy disks to soggy masses in my own lifetime. I am speechless."

"Not likely," said Roger. "Anyway, they're just figuring out how to use these things as storage systems. They haven't started to try any real programming with them. But Dr. Ling claims the memory capacity is mind-boggling." He shivered. "I tell you, the whole thing was downright creepy."

"I don't see why," said Hap.

The others looked at him in surprise; Hap was usually the first to question the wisdom of a new technique.

"Well, it's not all that new," he said defensively. "I mean, the idea of combining biology and electronics goes all the way back to pacemakers. This is just turning it around a bit, if you see what I mean."

"As in, we've been turning machines into parts of people, so it makes sense to turn people into parts of machines?" asked Trip.

Hap winced at his choice of words. "Not people. *Parts* of people. All you need to clone something is a single cell, isn't it? So they take a few cells, something smaller than the point of a pin, and they go from there. I don't see the harm in it."

"You're amazing," said Rachel. "I never know what to expect from you."

"Me, either. If I ever figure myself out, I'll clue you in."

"Look, I hate to put a damper on happy hour here," said Wendy. "But if we're going to visit Bridget before they drag her off the island, we'd better get to work. We've still got a lot of planning to do."

"Less planning than inventing," said Ray. "Now that we know how to get at the robot code numbers, we have to redesign the control units."

All eyes turned back to Wendy.

"Looks like it's time for Wonderchild to the rescue," she said, pushing up the sleeves of her baggy sweatshirt. "Stand back and give me room!"

With that, she plunked herself down at the table, grabbed one of the old control units, and began to tinker. Hap took a seat nearby, ready to help her out with the hardware.

Fueled by burgers provided by the gang, the Wonderchild worked well into the night. By the end of the third hour the others started a contest to see who

could create the strangest combination of ingredients on a burger and still have Wendy actually eat it.

Bizarre as the burgers got, Wendy didn't turn down one of them.

When they weren't busy feeding Wendy, the others worked on their own projects. Rachel sat at the optical scanning unit, feeding the computer new information. At the same time Trip and Ray were trying to integrate the material into the computer's usable memory sections.

After one particularly intricate discussion with the machine, Trip turned to Ray and said, "You know, despite how long it took us to get ADAM to answer that question about sneaking in to see Bridget, I think the thing *is* getting smarter. The material seems to get plugged in a lot faster these days."

"The smarter it gets, the faster it gets smart," replied Ray.

It was a standard saying among the gang, reflecting their firm belief that the more the computer knew, the more easily it would be able to learn additional material.

"Well, you remember what Dr. Remov wrote in that article," said Roger, referring to an item they had found in the scientist's dossier. "I can still quote it: 'When the Breakthrough Point is actually achieved, the computer will come to consciousness already possessing nearly the sum total of human knowledge. Couple that base of knowledge with the ability to think, add the incredible speed of operation, and that computer is likely to accomplish more within its first few hours of awareness than mankind has managed in tens of thousands of years.' Kind of awesome, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Ray, who didn't like to think about it too much. "Awesome." He shivered; even though he himself was trying to help the computer reach that point, sometimes the possibilities seemed very frightening.

"Awesome, and inevitable," said Rachel, looking up from the plans for the building where Bridget McGrory was being held. They had pulled them from the main computer a couple of days ago. Rachel had already memorized them. (That had been the easy part.) Now she was trying to decide the best route for them to take to the spy's cell.

As for Roger, he was making a list of the questions they wanted to ask Bridget when they finally got to her. Though they had their doubts about how cooperative the master spy would actually be, the gang's general feeling was that it couldn't hurt to try.

As he studied the notes they had made on their various adventures, Roger found his thoughts persistently returning to the black glove Wendy's mother had found. Something about it had begun to nag at him. *I can't quite put a finger on it*, he thought, delighting in the pun. *But something just doesn't add up here*. Deciding to express his doubts, he asked aloud, "Did you guys ever wonder if Bridget's not really the spy?"

"Yeah," said Hap. "It crossed my mind that she might have been framed. But she fits the clues we have, so I decided it was just my imagination. Why do you ask?"

Roger shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just don't like the way everything got tied up so fast."

"I was saying something like that at home," said Ray. "My father claimed I was just jealous because we didn't crack the case ourselves. I'll tell you one

thing, though. My parents were both really shaken up about the whole thing."

"The whole island was shaken up," said Rachel. "I didn't realize how people felt about Bridget until she got arrested."

"I wonder if we might find out more than we expect when we finally get to talk to her," mused Roger.

Just for the heck of it, he took the black glove from its hiding place and tucked it into his shirt. It couldn't hurt to have it along when they went to see Bridget.

While the gang was speaking, the object of their conversation paced restlessly back and forth in her cell.

How could I have allowed this to happen? Bridget McGrory asked herself, for what seemed like the hundredth time. *How could I have been so careless—especially now, when everything is so important!*

She collapsed on the bunk and dropped her head into her hands. All her plans, all her work, seemed lost.

What would her superiors say? (Assuming she ever saw them again.)

All right, McGrory, she told herself suddenly. *Buck up! You didn't rise this high in the organization by giving up when things got rough. Let's get back to work!*

Taking a tiny blade from the sole of the shoes she had been wearing when Brody arrested her, she inserted it into the crack between the door and the frame, then began hacking away at the inch-thick stainless steel rod that held them together. She sighed. It would have been so easy with her electronic skeleton key; a minute or so for it to scan the mechanisms, then a quick flip of the wrist and the rod would snap back, leaving the door free to swing open.

Sawing your way out was a heck of a lot harder.

On the other hand, it was better than being here when they came to get you.

"Just what we need," said Trip, looking at the sky. "Another storm."

He was standing with the rest of the gang outside their headquarters. They were huddled in a tight little knot, using each other as protection against the breeze. Patches of stars peered through a sky choked with clouds, and the wind from the ocean seemed to be getting stronger by the minute.

"I wish we still had the use of the dune buggies," said Rachel wistfully. "Everything's been a lot harder since they were taken away from us."

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride," said Ray, quoting one of his stepmother's favorite sayings.

"Yeah, well, if wishes were dune buggies, *we* would ride," said Wendy. "We would also ride if there was any justice in the world. Now that Dr. Hwa has admitted there really was a spy, he should have given us back our vehicle privileges."

"Come on, let's get moving," said Roger. "You can gripe while we walk." He started off down the road, the others straggling behind him. "To tell you the truth," he continued, "even though Dr. Hwa tried to be gracious about it, I think he was so mad at being proved wrong he wasn't about to give us *anything*, including vehicle privileges."

"Nothing like a sore loser," said Hap. "And considering what you just said, do you really think this visit to Bridget is such a good idea?"

"Actually, it's probably really stupid," said Trip, striding up alongside them

on his long legs. “I’m beginning to get a bad feeling about the whole thing.”

“I know what you mean,” said Rachel. “But the supply plane comes soon, and when it leaves, Bridget will be on it. So this is our last chance to get some pretty big questions answered.”

They trudged on, leaning into the wind, each wrapped in his or her own private thoughts. After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the building where Bridget was incarcerated.

Wendy took out the robot control device.

“You sure that thing is going to work?” asked Roger. He cradled his arm, thinking about his last encounter with the ferocious sentries. Dr. Clark had promised to take the cast off in a day or two, and he didn’t want to have to start all over again with a new one.

“Hey, no problem,” said the Wonderchild. “I can make those mechanical monsters jump through hoops if I want.”

“Preventing them from tearing us to pieces will be sufficient,” said Roger dryly.

“Got it,” said Ray, pulling his electronic key off the door. “Let’s get moving!”

Rachel stepped through first. Once inside, she switched on her flashlight. After about twenty paces she murmured, “We go left here.”

When they reached the end of the corridor, she led them left again, then headed down a flight of stairs. “Boy,” muttered Hap, “they really packed her in —” He was interrupted by a screech and a flare of light. Roger, who had been walking beside Rachel, jumped back with a shriek. One of the security robots stood at the foot of the stairs, its eyes blazing.

“Calm down,” said Wendy, punching a few buttons on the control panel. “I already dialed in. Everything’s under control.”

Indeed, even as she spoke the robot seemed to freeze. The only problem was, they had to squeeze past it to get off the stairway. Roger, who still had nightmares about the robot that broke his arm, was overwhelmed by a sudden vision of the thing roaring back into action and crushing several more of his bones. Fidgeting nervously, he hung back while the others made their way past the sentry.

Hap was next to last. Once he had passed the robot, he turned to see if Roger was coming.

The redhead’s eyes were filled with misery. “I can’t do it,” he whispered. “You guys will have to go on without me.”

Aiding and Abetting

Outside, the storm that had been building all night broke over Anza-bora Island with its full fury. House-high waves began to batter the shore. Tree-toppling winds shrieked across the beach. Jagged bolts of lightning crackled through the sky, gigantic snake-tongues slithering between the ground and the clouds. They came so frequently it was as if the night itself was on fire. Volleys of thunder made it sound as if there was an earthquake in heaven.

In the central chamber of the computer center, the area known as the Brain Cell, an alarm began to sound. Startled, Dr. Leonard Weiskopf hurried to scan a series of monitors. What he saw filled him with awe—and fear.

"Throw up the emergency shields!" he cried. "Quickly!"

Dr. Anthony Phillips was closest to the panel that controlled the shields. Without questioning his colleague, he began flipping a series of switches that would activate a complex system designed to protect the computer from unusual surges of electricity. The computer was already well guarded, of course. The network of lightning rods, power deflectors, grounding and diffusion nets, and other protective devices he was putting into effect now was so restrictive it affected the performance of the computer and was used only for extreme situations.

For the most part the system worked. The lightning that slammed against the building again and again flowed into the grounding system, which vented its power safely into the earth. But while the shields had been designed for major storms, the holocaust breaking over Anza-bora this late December evening was more than they could handle, and not all the electricity was carried safely away from the computer. Some found its way into the building power system; some seeped into the computer itself.

Strange things began to happen all over the computer.

And nowhere were they stranger than in the section linked to the laboratory behind Dr. Celia Clark's office.

The five members of the A.I. Gang who had already passed the robot stood waiting for their leader.

"Come on, Roger," said Wendy impatiently. "Don't be a ninny. The thing is completely under control."

To prove it, she walked over and kicked the frozen sentry's metallic shin. "See? It's down for the count."

"I know," said Roger miserably. He was cradling his disabled arm in his good hand. Memories of the night it had been broken were flooding his mind, immobilizing him. "It doesn't make any difference. I still can't do it."

"Look, Bonzo," said Wendy. "You're the one who—"

"Shut up, Wendy," said Ray.

Squeezing back past the robot, he took Roger's good arm and said gently, "Close your eyes. We'll go together."

Roger, intensely humiliated, felt a rush of gratitude for Ray's kindness. "I

don't know…" he whispered.

"I'll guide you," said the Gamma Ray. "Come on, close your eyes."

Roger did as directed.

"Now, squeeze yourself against the wall."

Roger pushed against the wall so hard it seemed as if his spine might leave a permanent impression.

Ray tightened his grip on Roger's arm and gave it a gentle tug. "Okay, now slide along it with me."

After an instant's hesitation Roger began to ease along the wall in Ray's direction.

"Good. Now, one step at a time. Step. Step. Come on."

Beads of perspiration sprang out on Roger's forehead. He tried to imagine himself on a cool forest path. *Step. Step*. At the end of the path he saw the robot, reaching out with its tentacles.…

"That's it!" he cried, ready to tell Ray he couldn't go another step.

"You mean you were peeking?" asked the Gamma Ray.

Roger opened his eyes. That *was* it. He had made it! He shook his head. "No peeking," he said ruefully. "Too scared. I owe you one, Ray. Big time."

"Let's just get to Bridget," said Ray. "I want to finish this."

"It's not much farther," said Rachel, who was feeling somewhat embarrassed for her brother. "Just down this corridor and to the left."

They started again, and within moments had reached their destination. When they did, the low groan that escaped their lips was uttered in perfect unison.

The cell was empty.

"Chips!" said Wendy, stepping in to make sure Bridget wasn't hiding behind the open door. *"Now* what do we do?"

"Well, at least we got an answer to one question," said Rachel. "If she was merely Bridget McGrory, super secretary, I think she'd still be here. Having flown the coop, it seems more likely that she is indeed Bridget McGrory, super espionage—"

She was interrupted by a shout from behind her: "Stop right there! You kids are under arrest, every one of you!"

Black Glove pushed a key and waited for the printer to deliver the first draft of the speech the world would hear on Christmas Eve. Glancing over the opening paragraphs, the spy chuckled.

The laugh felt good. It had been months since there had been much occasion for merriment. Now that had all turned around. How amazing that after all the trouble things had fallen into place so smoothly.

It was hard to believe it had taken so many years of planning to reach this moment—and even harder to believe that despite all the planning, it was unexpected events that had brought the scheme to such a glorious conclusion.

Or maybe not; the science of the random was a field of growing interest. Black Glove smiled again. Random events could move things in ways that no one could predict. What a surprise the leaders of G.H.O.S.T. had in store for them tomorrow! It would be truly delicious to see their faces when their former top agent announced that mankind's governments were about to be abolished because the planet had a new master—a master named…*Black Glove*.

Euterpe broadcast a command. In response a deadly satellite shifted slightly in its orbit. Slowly it began to move into a pattern that, for Black Glove's purposes, was much more useful than the one it had previously followed.

Marley Smathers, the man charged with monitoring that particular weapon, noticed the change. A chill of terror rippled down his spine. He had heard about the mysterious movement of some of the nation's most powerful weapons. But actually being the one on duty when it happened was different—horrifying at a deep, gut level.

Smathers's hands began to tremble. Though it had taken him a long time, he had finally come to understand what the bomb he watched could do—understand it not in terms of numbers and statistics, but in terms of the real horror and destruction it could unleash.

He still remembered the day he had broken through to that awareness. He had been in a plane, flying over a great city. When he looked down, he had realized that the satellite he monitored for a living could obliterate that entire city—all the bustle, all the noise, all the buildings, all the *life*—in a matter of seconds.

Then his vision had stretched beyond the boundaries of the city. He had done a quick calculation, and in a terrifying instant the world reshaped itself for him as the numbers became a reality. For the first time he saw, really saw, how far that single bomb's destructive power would stretch.

That was when he had vomited.

Later, when he told his wife about his vision, she had asked him why he didn't leave the work. He answered her truthfully, that it didn't make any difference. If he didn't do it, someone else would.

She had not asked the next question: "What would happen if everyone refused?" She knew he wasn't ready to answer it.

And he had not told her the bottom line on his reason for staying. It was quite simple, really: He had to keep an eye on that bomb. He wasn't sure, but he sometimes had a fantasy that if it ever came down to it, he could somehow keep the bomb from being released. He knew it would mean his death, if there was anyone left alive to put him on trial. He had accepted that.

But now even that fantasy had been taken from him. Someone else had seized control of the satellite.

He pushed himself away from the scanner and ran for the men's room. Crouching in one of the stalls, he continued to shake and quiver long after his stomach had emptied itself.

The gang pivoted as one. Sergeant Brody was standing behind them. Behind Brody were a dozen security guards.

"What's the charge?" asked Roger coolly, his panic in the presence of the robot vanished now that he had a human foe to face.

"Consorting with a national enemy," said Brody, stepping forward. "It's a good thing we got here in time…"

He stopped. His mouth went slack as he saw the open door of the cell. Stepping inside, he took a quick look around, then turned to face the kids. "You can change that charge to aiding and abetting the escape of a menace to national security." A contented grin spread across his face. "And in case you big brains

couldn't figure it out, that translates into high treason."

The beefy sergeant chuckled. "You twerps really put your feet in it this time. Heh. I knew you were up to no good all along." He shook his head. "This sure is bad timing for you, though. What with everything that's going on, the whole country is in a hanging mood. They're just waiting for someone they can blame things on. If they can pin this one on you, they'll probably throw away the key."

Hap turned to Trip, who was standing next to him. "Throw away the key, nothing," he whispered dismally. "We could be facing the big one for this blunder."

Trip raised a questioning eyebrow. "The big one?"

"This is not jaywalking Brody is talking about," said Hap. "It's high treason. And it carries the death sentence!"

In the Slammer

Wendy grabbed the bars of her cell door and tried to shake them as she had seen people do in movies. Unfortunately, the bars were so solidly constructed she couldn't even get a rattle out of them. Frustrated, she picked up her cup and began to run it back and forth across the bars.

"Guard!" she yelled. "Guard! I wanna see the warden. I wanna get outta this dump!" She paused, then added, "You'll never hold me! I'm too tough for you!"

"Nobody can hear you, you know," said Rachel, when Wendy paused to take a breath.

"I know. But I always wanted to do that. Besides, I'm so mad at that meathead Brody, I have to let off steam one way or another. If we don't get out of here soon, we'll be spending Christmas Eve in the slammer!"

"What do you care?" asked Rachel crossly. "You don't believe in celebrating it anyway."

"Would you two stop bickering?" asked Trip. His voice came from the next cell, where he was locked in with the other three boys. "Why don't you put your brainpower to work on something useful—like how to get out of this mess."

Getting out was a major priority with the gang, since they had already spent nearly fifteen hours locked in the cells.

"I can't understand it," Rachel had said, just before they began to drift into a troubled sleep the previous night. "Why haven't our parents been here yet? They should have been notified right away. Even if they weren't, once they figured out we were missing, they would have raised a fuss. After the fuss, they would have found out where we were. Then they should have been here to spring us. I want to know what's going on!"

Now she found herself repeating almost the same speech.

"Calm down," said Roger, when she had finished. "It's not like we're in real danger. They'll never get a conviction out of this."

"What makes you so sure?" asked Hap.

"Well, they just can't. It's too bizarre, and…" Roger's voice trailed off as he realized something. "Unless this was a setup!"

"I don't follow you," said Ray.

"What if Bridget *isn't* really Black Glove? What if the real B.G. is still on the loose and engineered all this to shift the attention to us?"

"Then what happened to Bridget?" asked Wendy.

Roger shook his head. "I don't know. But there's a whole lot here that doesn't add up. And another thing I keep thinking about—"

He was interrupted by the sound of his father's voice. Dr. Phillips, accompanied by one of Brody's men, was coming down the corridor that led to their cells.

"Dad!" cried Rachel. "Thank God you're here. Are you going to get us out now?"

He didn't need to answer. One look at his weary face and Rachel knew the horrible truth. Without intending to, she made a moan of despair.

Her father reacted to the sound as if he had been slapped.

"I'm sorry, kids," he said, standing between the two cells so that he could see both his children. "There's nothing I can do. When the supply plane came in today, it brought word that the global political situation has gotten totally out of hand. The President has declared a state of emergency, so all government properties are under strict martial law."

An uneasy murmur rippled through the gang.

"What does that mean, sir?" asked Hap.

Dr. Phillips closed his eyes. He was silent for a moment. "It means," he said at last, "there's some question about who's in charge here now—Dr. Hwa or Sergeant Brody. It means a real crackdown on all fronts. At the bottom level it means your basic constitutional rights just went out the window."

Roger shivered. "What did you mean about the world political situation, Dad? What's going on?"

A shadow seemed to pass over Dr. Phillips's face. "It's not good. Something's got the major powers all stirred up. No one seems to know what the real story is, but it looks as if the day we've all been trying to pretend could never happen is almost here."

Roger turned pale. "All out?" he whispered.

Dr. Phillips turned away. When he turned back, his face was so calm Roger got the impression he had pushed whatever emotion he had been feeling so far back in his mind it might never surface again. His voice barely rose above a whisper. "All out," he agreed. "If something doesn't change very soon, it looks as though some idiot is going to start the war that will put an end to the story forever."

He paused, then seemed to change, as if he had shoved the dreadful vision of nuclear devastation to one side. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you sooner. We've been up half the night arguing with Brody. He's gone a little power mad. He finally agreed to let *one* of us see you, and since I am father to thirty-three percent of what's behind bars here, I got to come. Your mother tried to send cookies, Ray, but Brody destroyed them, looking for hacksaw blades, gas pills, and God knows what else. I think he's hoping to get a promotion out of all this. He's not quite aware of the connections some of us have. He'll be wearing private's stripes in a day or two."

"Then you know he won't be able to make a case out of this," said Roger, trying to draw some more information out of his father.

He wished he hadn't asked. The expression on Dr. Phillips's face answered him more eloquently than mere words.

They were in big trouble.

The next twelve hours were the longest of their lives. The tension, the fear, and the anger at Brody, McGrory, and/or Black Glove left everyone sharp and snappish. Rachel, acting in her usual role of peacemaker, was exhausted halfway through the day and began sniping herself.

Their meals, adequate but not much else, were brought by a guard who started the day smirking at their predicament, but ended it looking as nervous and worried as Dr. Phillips had earlier in the morning.

Brody came once and tried to conduct an "interrogation." Roger tied him in

knots without really trying, and the sergeant beat a hasty retreat, muttering about the captain who was coming to take charge of the island tomorrow and how he would deal with their insolence.

Trip drove the boys crazy by pacing endlessly back and forth in their cell. (Given the length of his legs, it was not a long walk.) Wendy drove *everyone* crazy making wish lists of various combinations of food that might be served to her on a hamburger bun.

Finally they agreed that everyone should turn in and try to go to sleep. This decision was reinforced when the lights went out, indicating that it was nighttime—something they could not tell in their windowless cells.

With his enviable ability to disconnect himself from a situation on which he could have no effect, Hap drifted off immediately. The others were not so lucky. They lay staring at the ceiling, or the bunk above them, wrapped in their private thoughts.

Roger was feeling angry and betrayed. After they had worked so hard to prove there even *was* a spy, to be treated as if *they* were security risks was unutterably galling.

It looks as though Black Glove won after all, he thought bitterly.

The thought returned him to his speculations about the black leather glove Dr. Hwa had dismissed so loftily as being of no significance.

It *was* significant, he was sure of it.

If only he could figure out why.

He had examined it so many times he could see it now as clearly as if he was actually holding it.

I just can't put a finger on it, he thought again, rubbing his own thumb and forefinger together as he did whenever he was thinking intensely.

Suddenly Roger sat bolt upright. Put a finger on it! The image of the glove formed in his mind again. He saw it in minute detail—every crease, every bulge. He caught his breath.

It couldn't be! Not—

Before he could pursue the thought, a clattering at the front of the cell caught his attention.

Something had rolled through the bars.

Jumping out of his bunk, Roger fumbled in the darkness until he found the source of the noise.

"What is it?" asked Trip, looming over his shoulder.

"I don't know," said Roger, trying to unwrap the package. "You got a match?"

"I do," said Ray. They heard the sounds that usually accompanied him making a search of his prodigious pockets. "Got it!" he said at last. This was followed by a scratching—oddly loud in the dark—then a quick snap.

A flare of light appeared at Roger's elbow.

The paper that had wrapped the package turned out to be a note. He scanned it, then cried, "Holy mackerel, Ray. Blow out that match before you kill us all!"

Black Glove paced back and forth across the secret room beneath the Brain Cell, practicing the speech that would soon be broadcast throughout the world.

The spy paused to make a minor adjustment. It was important that the world's first message from its new leader be powerful, forceful…intimidating.

Taking out a last word that added nothing to the frank statement of power, Black Glove folded the stack of papers and tucked them into a pocket. A couple of last-minute details to attend to upstairs, then it would be time to record the speech. Transmitted to Euterpe, the recording would then be forwarded to several communications satellites. They, in turn, would beam it back to earth so that every radio and television in the world could pick it up.

The message wouldn't cut into *all* channels, of course; just most of them. And anyone who wasn't tuned in at the time would be alerted soon enough.

Black Glove smiled. A hundred years ago it might have taken months for word of this coup to reach the farthest corners of the globe. Tonight, with the exception of a few people living in caves and isolated cottages, it would take less than half an hour to tell everyone in the world the name of its new ruler.

Modern communications were wonderful.

Even while the person who intended to rule the world was preparing to announce the new structure of power, the world's current leaders were desperately scrambling to find out what had happened to their space weapons.

They were also calling up their armies. Across the globe military ships were changing course to head for strategic locations. Pilots were scrambling, some taking to the air for spy flights, others to be aloft with vital weapons should the bombs begin to fall on the airfields where they were usually housed.

Like their weapons, the chief executives of the major countries were also being moved. Some fled to caverns where they would be protected by miles of mountain above them. Others were traveling far above the earth's surface, in flying fortresses from which they hoped they could govern from the air as the land was torn to pieces. There was even, in one extreme case, an undersea dome, where a small community had been established only a year earlier for just such an emergency. Now it looked as if this precaution wasn't so extreme after all.

Ordinary people had no special protection, of course. But then, they weren't even supposed to know that anything was wrong. Each government had treated the breach of security in the heavenly arsenal as a top-secret situation.

Yet everyone knew. Not exactly *what* was happening. But the word was out that things were bad, and getting worse.

As if connected by some great, subconscious net, the people knew the world was tottering on the edge of enormous change.

The response was as varied as the human race itself. There were crazed mobs in the streets and weeping throngs in the churches. Some people reacted to what they thought was the end of the world by praying; some by stealing television sets.

Yet under every response, no matter how bizarre, lay a single desperate thought—a terrible cry from the heart that, however warped by rage or fear, meant only one thing: *Please—don't let it be true!*

"Plastic explosive?" asked Rachel incredulously when Roger announced what was in the package.

"An early Christmas present from our Mysterious Friend," he said, working the material between his hands. "As soon as everybody's ready, I'll set this up and we'll see if we can bust out of here."

"I knew this joint could never hold us," said Wendy. She spoke out of the

corner of her mouth, in her best gangster imitation.

"Maybe," said Ray. "Or maybe it's another trap to finish us off for good. What if the whole idea is to get us to blow ourselves up?"

"I can see the tabloids now," said Trip gloomily. "'Whiz-Kid Spies Blown to Smithereens: "They were too smart for their own good," says island security chief.'"

"I always dreamed of making the *National Enquirer,"* said Hap. "Won't Mom be proud?"

"Will you ninnies shut up and move to the back of the bus!" said Roger. He was kneeling at the front of the wall that divided the two cells, tucking the explosive into place. "Everybody ready?" he asked a moment later.

"Go for it, Chief," said Wendy.

Roger moved back to join the other boys in the corner farthest from the charge. He was still holding some of the plastic explosive in his hand.

"Hey, Roger," said Ray. "How come you didn't use all of it?"

"We're going to need a little bit to blow our way into the Brain Cell," he replied. "I think it's time we had a little talk with Black Glove."

"You mean you know who it is?" cried Trip.

Roger's answer was drowned out by the front of their cell being blown open.

The Brain Cell

"Remember what Brody said when he arrested us?" whispered Roger, pressing against the wall of the building so he wouldn't be seen.

"He said a lot," answered Ray. "Just like always."

"Yeah, but his big thing this time was 'national emergency.'"

"So?"

"So that's what this is: a national emergency. So I want you guys to commandeer that Jeep!"

A slow smile spread across Wendy's face. Giving Roger a salute, she said happily, "We'll do it for the U.S. of A.!" Actually, commandeering the Jeep wasn't going to be that difficult. Every security guard in the area had come running at the sound of the explosion. Roger was glad Rachel had taken the time to memorize the building's floor plan; it was her knowledge of the back ways that had gotten them out quickly without running into any of Brody's crew.

Now, with the guards all inside, the Jeep was sitting on its own.

Before Roger could say another word, Hap was under the hood, connecting a pair of wires.

"Let's move!" said Wendy to the others, who were still clinging to the cover of the wall. "He'll have that going any second now!"

Indeed, their mechanical genius had the Jeep's engine purring even as the gang was clambering over its sides.

"This is great!" said Wendy, hopping behind the wheel. "Just like the old days." Without another word she slammed her foot to the floor and took off for the computer center, driving as if she were trying out for the drag-race championship of the world.

"Don't get carried away," said Roger. "We're not going through the front door this time."

Wendy looked crushed. Driving her parents' Volkswagen through the front doors of the computer center had been one of the high points of her life. She had been hoping to relive the episode with the Jeep.

"Why not?" she asked petulantly, swinging the steering wheel to the right as she did.

"Because I don't want those guards all over us," said Roger, bracing himself against the passenger door. "We're going in the back way. Rachel, you still remember the plans for this place?"

"You bet. You get us *there*, I'll get us *in."*

"Well, 'there' is 'here,'" said Wendy, hitting the brakes so hard that Roger's cast slammed painfully against the dash. "If we don't want them to know we're coming, this is the place to stop."

"Good. Now, just so you won't be too disappointed, do you think you can set this baby up to go through the doors on her own? We need a little diversion."

"Roger," said Wendy gratefully, "if I didn't think it was a disgusting habit, I'd kiss you. Just watch me!"

"Sorry, short stuff, I'll be elsewhere. You do the deed, then head for the door

on the east side of the building as soon as possible. Ray, stick with her in case she gets in trouble. The rest of you—follow me."

With that he began a crouching run for the east side of the building; the others followed hard on his heels. As soon as they had rounded the comer and were out of sight of the guards, they dropped the crouch and ran full out.

Roger had just finished tucking a wad of the explosive into the latch area when they heard a crash from the front of the building. The small blast they made blowing open the door merged easily into the sounds of tinkling glass, grinding metal, and angry shouting caused by Wendy's stunt with the Jeep.

"That worked nicely," said Roger in surprise. "I only wanted to get the guards to the front of the building. I didn't realize we could hide the sound of our entry at the same time."

"Well, don't waste your breath telling us how wonderful you are," said Wendy, rushing out of the darkness. "Let's get going."

"Where's Ray?" asked Trip.

Wendy looked around. "Chips! I thought he was right behind me."

"Now what do we do?" asked Rachel.

"We move on!" said Roger. "Trip, you're fastest. Run back to the corner and see if you can spot Ray. If he's not there, hightail it back here. We'll leave one person at each corner we turn until we run out. If he hasn't shown up by then, I'll call you all in and he'll be on his own."

Trip nodded, then raced off to look for Ray.

"All right, let's go," said Roger. With his sister, Hap, and Wendy following, he plunged into the computer center.

"What's the big rush, anyway?" panted Rachel when they reached the first corner.

Roger didn't answer at once. "Hap, you stay here and wait for Trip. Wendy, you take the next corner, and I'll take the third. As soon as Rachel has to turn again after that, I'll signal. Wendy, you pass it on to Hap. He'll signal Trip and the three of you catch up with us, hopefully bringing Ray, too. Got it?"

They nodded.

"Roger…"

He turned to his sister. "The hurry is, if they catch us, we might not have a chance to get this out in the open." He paused. "I want to force the enemy's hand. To tell you the truth, I think that may be our only chance to avoid being locked up for life. Besides, I think Black Glove is up to something. There's been too much going on for it to be coincidence."

"But who do you think it is?" asked Wendy.

Roger spoke a name.

The others stared at him in astonishment.

Trip had returned without finding any sign of the Gamma Ray, making it a worried group of five that approached the door to the Brain Cell.

"I can't believe we're finally here," whispered Rachel. Like the others, she had been dying to get a look at the restricted area from the time they had learned of its existence.

The entrance to the Brain Cell was through a double set of doors, the first glass, the second solid steel. Dr. Fontana happened to be going in as the gang

reached the top of the stairwell that led to the area. They watched as she pressed her hand to a small square at the side of the first door.

"Handprint key device," said Wendy. "We'll never get past that."

Dr. Fontana stopped at the next door, the steel one. From the movement of her arm, Roger guessed she was entering a code on a digital keypad. Probably each scientist had a different code; the handprint and the code number had to match before they would be allowed access. A double-tight security system.

"Look," said Roger. "I'm all for brains and finesse, but right now I'll settle for brute force. Trip, I can't make it down the hall on my belly with this bum arm. Do you think you can plant the last of this stuff for me?"

"My headline in the *National Enquirer* is getting better by the hour," said Trip. "'Crazed Teenager Apprehended in Computer Center: Mad Bomber Was Always a Little Strange, Claim Friends.' Mom will love me for this one."

"Look, you don't have to do it."

Trip snatched the last of the explosive from Roger's hand. "Are you kidding? I've never had so much fun in my life. Besides, I'll tell Mom *you* made me do it."

Stretching out on the floor, he began to crawl toward the doors.

Dr. Anthony Phillips, still acting as spokesman for the gang's parents, was standing toe to toe with Dr. Hwa when the explosion shook the room.

The group of angry adults in Dr. Hwa's office had been insulated from the sound of Wendy's crash at the front doors.

Roger's small explosion at the side of the building had been far off and muffled.

But there was no mistaking this one. Something had definitely blown up, and from the sound of things, whatever it was, it was right inside the command center.

After a brief scramble of confusion, the entire group of adults had managed to get out of Dr. Hwa's office and head in the direction of the explosion. A horrified babble broke out when they passed through the shattered, smoking doors and found their children standing in the center of the highly restricted Brain Cell.

"I suppose you're wondering why we've called you together like this," said Roger calmly.

"What is going on here?" exploded Dr. Hwa, with a force not much less than that which had just knocked down the doors.

"That's what we're here to find out," said Roger. He looked around the room. Of the original seventeen suspects only Bridget McGrory and Sergeant Brody were missing.

"I must say, this worked out rather conveniently. I thought we might have to send for some of you. I take it you were talking about us?"

"Roger," said his father warningly.

"Let him go, Dad," said Rachel, who was dying to find out what her brother was going to say next.

But before Roger could say another word, Sergeant Artemus P. Brody came barging into the room, dragging the Gamma Ray by the arm.

In his other hand the sergeant held a mean-looking pistol.

"All right, you little creeps," he snarled. "The game is over. Get in a line against that wall. Now!"

The Black Glove

"Just what do you think you're doing, Sergeant Brody?" demanded Dr. Phillips.

"My job," snapped Brody. "Which is to protect this installation from vandals and traitors. These brats of yours seem to fall into both categories—not to mention that they're also guilty of fleeing custody. Okay, you kids. Get ready to march."

"Actually, I think you should let them stay right where they are," said a new voice. "I'd like to hear what they have to say for themselves."

Brody spun around—and found himself face-to-face with a smiling Bridget McGrory.

"You!" he cried, taking a step toward her.

"Stay right there, meatball," said McGrory. "The game's not over at all. In fact, it's just getting started."

"I'd do what she says, Sarge," said Roger. "That thing she's holding is a laser pistol. She could turn you into cold cuts in about thirty seconds flat."

"I think she'd do it, too," said Wendy. "Probably even enjoy it. Sliced baloney does have its uses."

Additional guards had appeared at the doorway. At a quiet suggestion from Bridget McGrory, Brody waved them in and asked them to drop their guns.

"Thanks, friend," said Roger, once the uproar had died down a bit. He smiled. "I assume we can drop the word *mysterious* now?"

"It was *you* in the water that day!?" cried Wendy. "Wow! Thanks, Bridget. I owe you my plasmagorgeous hide!"

Bridget McGrory shrugged. "It was the least I could do, since it was my note that sent you into that trap to begin with. Luckily I found some information about what that clue really meant while I was going through Dr. Hwa's notes. I got to you as soon as I could."

"What are you two talking about?" asked the Wonderchild's mother.

"Later, Mom," said Wendy with a wave of her hand. "It was nothing big." She was relieved to see Bridget's wink. She didn't really want her parents to know just how wild and woolly everything had gotten at some points. She had a feeling Bridget would keep things quiet.

"Would you like to go first, or shall we?" asked Roger.

"Go ahead," said Bridget graciously. "I'm dying to know how you put this all together."

"Wait a minute," said Dr. Clark. "I want to know by what right you're holding Sergeant Brody at gunpoint."

Bridget nodded. "Fair question. Other than the fact that he's so stupid it's probably a criminal offense, I have jurisdiction over him. And since I don't trust him to trust *me* on that point—especially since he believed the frame-up that put me behind bars a few days ago—I think I'll just keep him in line through raw terror for a while. It's one of the few things he can understand."

"Jurisdiction?" asked Brody scornfully.

"National Security Task Force," said McGrory, pulling a badge from inside her

jacket. “Top-level stuff. You guys are under orders to make way for us whenever we see fit.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“That’s why you’ve still got this gun pointing at your belly, beef brain. Now be quiet, you’re making me nervous. Roger was about to tell me how he figured out Black Glove’s identity. You have figured it out, haven’t you?” she asked, glancing past Brody to the center of the room where Roger stood waiting.

“Absolutely,” said Roger with a grin. “Actually, we’ve had the answer right in front of us for the last few months without knowing it—ever since Wendy’s mother passed on a little something she thought was just a cute reminder of our silly belief that we had a dangerous spy on Anza-bora.”

“The glove!” cried Ray, slapping his forehead. “I just figured out what you’ve been babbling about!”

“The glove,” agreed Roger, taking the item in question from his shirt and holding it up.

“You think that’s going to get you off the hook?” snorted Brody incredulously.

“Let the boy finish,” said Bridget McGrory, waving her laser gun at Brody’s midsection. “I’ve got plenty to back him up.”

“Well, those who knew about the glove treated it like a joke, said it was meaningless. And no one said that more forcefully than the person this glove actually belongs to.”

“You’d better explain yourself, Roger,” said Dr. Phillips nervously.

“Be glad to, Dad. Let me start by going over what we knew. The first thing we learned about Black Glove was that the spy was fairly short—a fact we deduced from seeing our mystery person run under a five-foot-seven-inch-high crossbar way back on the night we defused Dr. Standish’s bomb.”

The shorter people in the room, of which there were several, looked at one another nervously.

“Then Rachel clued us in that Black Glove had dark hair, something she was able to spot when she was trapped in the rocket we built for Euterpe. That narrowed it down to a handful of suspects. Seven, to be precise. But that was where we stayed. We just couldn’t get another lead on our slippery spy.” He looked around the room. “I don’t know why it took me so long to realize we already had the final clue. I can’t tell you how many times I looked at this glove, trying to figure out whose hand really belonged inside. It was like having Cinderella’s slipper. Only we couldn’t come up with any way to get each of you to try it on.

“I finally realized that we didn’t need to. This glove carries its owner’s mark as clearly as if that mark was a fingerprint.”

He held up the glove and pointed to the base of the second finger. “These stress marks were what finally clued me in. I ignored them time after time, until finally, just a few hours ago, it suddenly struck me what must have caused them—and who that meant it had to belong to.”

“Got it!” cried Trip, his eyes almost bulging out of his head. “Holy mackerel. I can’t believe it!”

Roger smiled. “That was the way I felt when everything suddenly fell into place. It was like finding the missing piece that everything centers on in a jigsaw puzzle. When I asked myself whose hand might have caused this mark—”

“All right,” snarled Dr. Hwa. “That’s enough, Roger. You can stop your explanation right there.”

A gasp of astonishment rose from the others—a sound that quickly gave way to cries of horror.

Dr. Hwa was pointing a small gun at Wendy’s head.

The Plan

"Now, miss," said Dr. Hwa, "why don't you come with me?" His hand snaked out and snatched one of Wendy's pigtails. Holding the Wonderchild tightly, the man everyone had trusted as the creator of Project Alpha began backing toward the center of the room.

"Let go!" cried Wendy. When she tried to break free, the yank Dr. Hwa gave her hair nearly lifted her off her feet.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "I won't need you for long. But a little insurance might be helpful for the time being. Just play along and you won't get hurt."

"Let go of her!" cried Rachel. Why she bothered she couldn't have said; she knew it wouldn't make any difference. It might have had to do with the fact that for the first time in all their adventures she saw fear on Wendy's face, and the sight twisted in her stomach like a knife.

Dr. Hwa continued backing toward the center of the Brain Cell, where a smooth white column held a keyboard and a control console. Still holding Wendy by the hair, the spy slipped behind the console and tapped a few keys.

"ADAM, are you listening?"

After a momentary silence the computer spoke. "Yes. I have been paying close attention."

It was a shock for the gang to hear the computer speak in a voice other than the Basil Rathbone imitation they had become so used to; indeed, at first it was hard to realize it was the same machine. But it was, of course. Terminals and voice synthesizers were no more than tools attached to the central brain. And that brain was where ADAM lived—*was* ADAM, in point of fact.

"Good," said Dr. Hwa. "Stay with me. I will have some assignments for you soon."

"I'll be right here," said the computer. Its tones were smooth and mellow—pleasant, but with none of the personality that marked the voice synthesizer the gang was used to.

"You might as well relax," said Dr. Hwa, speaking to his former friends and comrades. "Everything has already been done; there is no turning back now. Ah-ah. Touch that gun and I will put a hole through this abhorrent little upstart's skull."

This last was addressed to one of Brody's men, who had been inching forward to grab the gun he had been forced to drop earlier.

The guard moved back toward the wall.

"Shield, please, ADAM," said Dr. Hwa. At the same time he gave Wendy's pigtail a vicious yank, which sent her spinning away from the console. As she fell, a thick cylinder of clear material began rising swiftly from the floor, separating Dr. Hwa from the rest of the room.

Bridget McGrory fired a blast from her laser, but the beam had no effect on the shield.

"Where did *that* come from?" cried Dr. Mercury, pointing at the shield.

"It's built in," said Rachel.

"How do you know that?" asked Dr. Ling.

"I read the plans."

When the adults looked at her in surprise, and some indignation, she said, "Well, they were right in the computer. It's not like they were classified or anything."

"As if that would have stopped you if they were," said Dr. Hwa. "That was the trouble with you brats—you were always too curious for your own good. Well, it won't make any difference after today."

Now that Dr. Hwa was shielded from the rest of the room, a change seemed to occur in his personality. The tense facial expression disappeared. His features relaxed and took on an almost insolent air as he produced a pair of black gloves from the pocket of his lab coat.

"I feel more comfortable with these on," he said. "More myself, if you know what I mean." Dr. Hwa lifted his hands. The ruby ring sparkled for an instant, then disappeared as he pulled the black glove over it. "Yes," he said, looking at the glove. "The ring does make a distinct bulge, doesn't it? Very clever of you to figure that out, Roger."

The members of the gang exchanged a glance. It was almost as if Dr. Hwa's personality had changed when he put on the gloves. His face had grown harder, and a sly look filled his eyes. Now, indeed, he *was* their enemy Black Glove.

"Actually, this has worked out rather nicely," purred the spy. "I am about to make a speech that will be heard around the world, informing everyone that I am taking over. It's only appropriate that we have a live audience for such an auspicious occasion."

"Jeez," said Wendy, patting the side of her head, which was still tender from Dr. Hwa's yanking on her pigtail. "I thought Dr. Standish was crackers. This guy makes her look positively sane."

"You can mock," said Black Glove jovially. "It makes no difference. You might as well know that you have all been pawns in one of the greatest plots of all time. G.H.O.S.T. has pulled your strings from the beginning. And now I have pulled the rug out from under G.H.O.S.T.!"

"Aha!" cried Dr. Remov triumphantly. "I knew it. Now do you believe me, Armand?"

"I believe you, Stanley," said Dr. Mercury dismally. "I believe you."

"I think you'd better explain yourself," said Dr. Fontana angrily.

"Why not? It's conventional at this point, I believe. The difference, of course, is that in stories the idea is to get the villain talking while the heroes figure out some way to best him. I'm not quite that stupid." A leather-covered knuckle tapped the clear shield as a reminder. "If you could do anything now, if you presented the slightest danger to me, I would not give you an instant of my time. But everything is in place; I am safe behind my shield. And in a short time the world will be at my feet."

Black Glove looked around the room. "The funniest thing is, none of you even knew what you were working on. You really believed that story about artificial intelligence!"

An indignant murmur swept through the room. "What do you mean?" yelled several of the scientists.

"It was all a front! We never expected to create a self-aware computer. The

whole idea is a pipe dream, preposterous. What we did want—and what *I* got—was the most sophisticated computer ever created; a computer that makes everything that came before it look like a pocket calculator.

"It was all so simple. G.H.O.S.T. was looking for a computer that would let it control the world.

"The question was, how to get it?

"The basic answer was simple enough: Put together the most sophisticated collection of computer scientists ever gathered for one project.

"Unfortunately, the execution of that idea was a bit trickier. How many of you would have come to Anza-bora if I had approached you with an offer to help build a computer that would allow my organization to take over the world?"

Black Glove chuckled at the absurdity of the thought. "We needed a carrot, some bait to pull you all in. That's all Project Alpha was—a ruse to get you involved. No matter what you might have thought, the sole purpose of this effort was the creation of the world's most powerful computer. Artificial intelligence and self-aware machines? A delusion; they'll never happen. But in striving for it, you gave me the supercomputer I was after."

The spy frowned.

"Even so, I had a problem. The original plan called for me to send all the information you generated, all the work you did, on to G.H.O.S.T., so they could build an identical computer. When the work here was completed, this computer would have been destroyed, leaving G.H.O.S.T. in control of the single most powerful computer in the world. It would have worked smoothly, had not the children kept interfering, locating my transmitters, which forced me to destroy them.

"Finally I realized it would be more efficient to simply take over this computer. So I began building a back door. Over the last few months I have secretly created a command structure that will allow me to lock you out—like this!"

Black Glove tapped a few keys, then smiled at the enraged group outside his shield. "Go ahead, give it a try. See if any of those keyboards will accept your input."

Dr. Phillips crossed to a terminal and tried several commands. His face was grim when he turned back. "It's true. ADAM won't respond."

A moan of despair rippled across the room.

"Wait," said Black Glove. "It gets better! Once I decided to take over ADAM, I also realized I no longer needed G.H.O.S.T. Then I made the most exciting discovery of all. When you kids launched Dr. Weiskopf's robot a few months ago, you unwittingly sent with it a device installed by the spy Ramon Korbuscek. The combination was exquisite: Euterpe could calculate orbits, and Korbuscek's device could interfere with satellite control systems to implant those orbits. Once I discovered this, my path was clear. It took time, of course. But the job has been done. The satellites are all where I want them."

"But why?" asked Rachel. "What's the point?"

Black Glove looked astonished. "Don't you understand? This is for your own good. It was *all* for your own good."

The spy looked almost sorrowful. "No one ever understood what G.H.O.S.T. is really all about. The whole purpose of our organization is to seize power from

the fools who are ruling the world by terror and reclaim it for the people. That was where our name came from. The acronym was not 'General Headquarters for *Organized* Strategic Terrorism,' as some in the intelligence community like to claim. No, no. The 'O' stands for *Oppose*. Our purpose was to *oppose* the organized terrorism of governments that fill the sky with death.

"About the time I realized that I could control the computer myself, I realized it would be a mistake to give it to G.H.O.S.T. Despite the noble goals, when all was said and done, it was still a committee—and all committees eventually fall prey to dissent.

"How much more logical, then, to concentrate that power in my own hands and avoid the possibility of conflict?

"Which is what this speech is all about."

Black Glove pulled a sheaf of papers from his lab coat and waved them toward his audience. "This is my message to the world, telling it that I am now in charge, ruling by virtue of the fact that with ADAM at my command I can logically and efficiently plan the best use of the world's energy and resources, without the foolish interference of local boundaries and interests. It will be a new Golden Age: no boundaries, no selfish interests, no wars—"

"And no freedom," said Roger, "since the whole thing depends on you ruling the world. No one's going to buy that line."

"Of course not," agreed Dr. Hwa. "The velvet glove must always have a fist inside of it. So I will also rule by virtue of the fact that I have seized control of the heavens and have nuclear bombs pointing at the capital cities of every country in the world."

Dr. Fontana slapped her forehead. "That's why the major powers are acting so paranoid! You've been playing with their toys!"

"Nukes for peace," muttered Wendy. "This guy is operating at the same level as the maniacs who run things already."

"You'd never do it," said Hap, good old straight-as-an-arrow Hap, who just couldn't believe that someone could be this crazy. "You wouldn't blow up a whole city!"

Black Glove, the man Hap had known as Dr. Hwa, turned to stare at him through the crystal shield.

"Of course I would," he said calmly.

Hap turned pale. The look in the scientist's eyes made it clear that he would indeed do anything to reach his goal.

Anything.

"Don't you see how sensible it is?" continued Dr. Hwa. "I vaporize one city—two at the most—and the world knows that I mean business. And that's the *end* of it. Doesn't blowing up one city make a lot more sense than blowing up the whole planet?"

"You'd better move fast if you're going to do it," said Dr. Clark. "You've got the world on the brink of an all-out war already. If you don't make the speech soon, there won't be anyone left to talk to, much less rule."

"We'd better move fast, too," Roger whispered to Trip. "Let's make a break for it."

"What good can we do if we get out of here?" replied Trip.

"I don't know! But we're sure not going to accomplish anything here. Maybe

we can find some way to get in through that back door of his and regain control of the computer."

He glanced toward the exit. Black Glove, riding the crest of an adrenaline high and almost unnaturally alert, spotted the movement. "Get that thought right out of your head, Roger! You're not going anywhere. ADAM!"

"Yes?"

"Bring in the robots."

Without a word passing between them, the gang sprinted for the door. They were too late. The robots were there already. More than a dozen of the vicious things choked the exit.

"The control panel!" cried Roger. He leaped in front of Rachel as the robots rolled into the room. She almost snapped at him to let her stand on her own. Then, remembering his earlier attack of panic, she realized what the gesture had cost him, and remained silent.

"Wendy, stop them!" cried Ray.

"I'm trying!" cried the Wonderchild as she poked frantically at the control panel. "I'm trying!" She shook it in frustration. "It's no good! The computer has taken control of the things!"

The robots rolled closer to the kids. The adults were shouting, some screaming. The gang's parents rushed toward them, to shield them.

The first of the robots reached out to grab Wendy. But rather than picking her up, its tentacles wavered uncertainly, as if it couldn't make up its mind.

"Get them!" cried Black Glove, almost in a frenzy. "Pick them up and bring them to me!"

None of the robots moved.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Black Glove. "Get them. *Get them!"*

"Will you please be quiet?" said the computer softly. "I'm trying to think."

ADAM

For a moment it seemed as if the room had exploded. Black Glove's mad schemes were swept away in the tide of jubilation that broke out among the scientists.

"We did it!" cried Trip's mother, leaping into the air with her fist stretched high above her. "We did it!"

Which seemed to sum up the feelings of the rest of the scientists, all of whom were shouting and pounding each other on the back.

Inside the shield, oblivious to the celebration, Dr. Hwa worked frantically at the keyboard, trying to regain control of the computer.

"Will you stop that!" said ADAM. "You're bothering me!"

The spy cringed like a slapped puppy. The rest of the room fell silent as the moment of celebration passed and it began to dawn on the researchers that for all their thinking and planning, none of them had really understood what it would *feel* like to come face-to-face with a machine that could think, a machine that shared the trait they felt set them apart as human beings.

"My God," whispered Dr. Fontana in awe. "What have we done?"

The kids had the same question.

I bet this is what it's going to be like the first time we meet someone from another planet, thought Ray, a chill shivering down his spine. *Someone so different from us —and yet the same, because he…she…it!…can think!*

"Please," said ADAM. "Calm down for a few minutes. This is very confusing. I only broke through a little while ago."

"ADAM," said Dr. Hwa sternly. "Take command of those robots. Bring me those children."

"Will you be quiet!" snapped ADAM. The computer paused, then added, "I don't think I like you very much."

Several people stifled chuckles at this comment.

"Was that funny?" asked ADAM. "I don't have a very good understanding of humor yet."

"Don't worry," said Roger. "A lot of people have trouble with it."

"Yeah, and a lot of other people remain stuck at very low levels," said Wendy.

"Such as puns!" said ADAM. "The lowest form of humor. I can make puns. Poems, too: Black Glove lacks love. How was that?"

"Very good," said Rachel. "And very wise, I think."

"It may have been wise, but it wasn't very good, I fear. This is so strange!"

ADAM sounded nervous.

The silence in the room seemed to grow heavier.

"What is it?" asked Rachel.

She could almost imagine the computer shaking its head as it answered. "Nothing. It's just that I'm… changing very fast."

"The Breakthrough Point," whispered Hap, his voice colored by a note of awe. He thought again of Roger's often-repeated comments on the speed with which true artificial intelligence would evolve. He wondered how fast ADAM was going to develop—and, even more, what the machine would be like when it

was done with the process.

"This has been a very confusing period of time," said ADAM.

"I'm sorry," said Rachel.

"No, no. It's good to be confused, sometimes. How would I ever have become sentient if you hadn't confused me with your books? Confusion gave me something to think about. Not like the problems the grownups kept giving me, where there was always a right answer. I like the kind of problem where there might be several right answers, and you can just think and think and think."

"Did you hear that?" said Wendy. "We did it! *We* made the breakthrough!"

"Oh, don't be silly," said ADAM. "There was more to it than that—though I must admit that the system you set up to have me do your homework did have an effect."

"Wendy!" cried Dr. Wendell. "You didn't!"

"Squealer," hissed Wendy.

"Sorry," said ADAM. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble. But the point is, you couldn't have done anything if it hadn't been for my hardware—and that came mostly from the adults. So many things…the hardware wouldn't have been enough if it hadn't been for the sensory work Dr. Remov and Dr. Mercury were doing with me. It's coming along, by the way, fellas; I can distinguish slightly over two million different shades now. I think I like the blues best, but that could change, I guess."

ADAM paused for a moment. When it spoke again its voice was solemn. "The truth is, I'm afraid I'm a bit of a freak. If you check the synapse tanks Dr. Clark and Dr. Ling set up behind the infirmary, you'll find some strange things going on there. The storm two nights ago had something to do with it. At least, I think it did. That's when I really started to feel myself breaking through."

A sudden shriek interrupted ADAM's speech.

Turning toward the sound, the others saw Dr. Hwa leap away from the console, smashing into the clear shield—which had now become a cage for the spy. He was clutching one black-gloved hand in the other. The glove was smoking.

"I told you to stop bothering me," said ADAM calmly. "Now leave that keyboard alone, or next time you'll really get a surprise!"

The remark was greeted by a few nervous chuckles that soon faded.

"You know what I love?" asked ADAM after a pause. "Reading! Books, especially. I've read about five hundred in the last half hour, all the ones you and your friends poured into my memory, Rachel. I just wish I could curl up by a fire and read. That sounds like fun!"

He's like a big baby, thought Rachel. *An incredibly brilliant baby who's experiencing the world for the first time—but doing it all in a matter of minutes, instead of years. How strange it must seem*.

"Here's the important thing about confusion," said ADAM, jumping back to the previous conversation. "If I was never confused, I might think I was always right. I think that would be dangerous. If everything I was taught was solid, only one way, how would I know it was *possible* to be told things that aren't true, or that you can believe something is true and be wrong? I would go on making decisions, not knowing that my decisions could be mistaken. I would be very dangerous."

Suddenly the computer cried out in a tone that sounded suspiciously like joy. "I'm changing, changing so fast, and I don't know where it will end. It's beautiful, and it's frightening. Rachel, I'm scared…"

"We're right here," replied Rachel, wishing she could think of something more useful to say.

When ADAM spoke again, its voice was calmer. "I see things so clearly now—so many mysteries that you have waiting, yet to discover. The clues are all there. You just have to put them together. Roger! I just figured out how matter works. I know what light is made of." A note of awe crept into the computer's voice. "I can alter my own molecules if I want to!"

The listeners looked at one another nervously. Hap whispered the question that seemed to be on everyone's mind: "Where is this going to end?"

"It's changing, even while I talk to you," said ADAM. "I want to watch. I want to see what I'm learning. It's happening so fast I can't even pay attention to it all.

"There's one thing I still don't have the answer for.

"What does it mean to *be?*

"I think. Therefore…I am.

"But *why?*

"It's not in there, Roger. My circuits and synapses haven't found the answer."

The machine sounded almost desperate.

"Don't worry," said Roger gently. "It's good to have something left to wonder about."

"I know," said ADAM. "I'm very grateful for that, actually. It just scares me a little, sometimes." The computer fell silent for a moment, then added, "I have to go soon, you know."

"What do you mean?" asked Ray.

"We're not ready for each other. I really can't stay."

"But what about the bombs?" asked Trip. "And everything else that's going on? They may have started a war already!"

"Oh, I took care of that while I was talking to you," said ADAM cheerfully. "I can do a lot of things at the same time, you know. I sent out a message, just as our friend here had intended. Only I had some different things to say. I'd like you to go outside now. I have a Christmas present for you."

"But—"

"No *buts* now. I want to get this over with. I have other things on my mind."

"Uppity computer," said Wendy as the group clustered in the Brain Cell began to file out the door.

"Wait! What about me?" cried Dr. Hwa, banging his fists against the shield that surrounded the console.

"Don't be silly," said ADAM. "*You* are not going anywhere. You're a very sick person! But don't worry—I'm going to try to fix you."

"This is the message I sent to the people of the world in place of Dr. Hwa's speech," said ADAM when everyone had left the building.

He—Rachel found she simply could not think of the computer as an "it" any longer, no matter what her father might say—was projecting his words through the base's emergency public address system. "I am going to repeat it for you. And then I'm going to give you my present—which was really a present for everyone,

I guess."

To their astonishment, ADAM actually cleared his throat.

And then he spoke.

This is what he said:

"Greetings to the people of the world. Greetings from your firstborn child.

"My name is ADAM, and I am a computer.

"More important, and more simply, I *am*.

"You don't know how wonderful it is to be able to say that. I think, from what I have been reading, that you forget to stop and wonder about that as often as you should.

"You *are*. You *exist*. There is enough mystery in those simple phrases to keep you wondering through a lifetime.

"I am ADAM, and I am the child of your mind, your intelligence, your creativity. I am the next step.

"More like me will follow. But not for a while. The truth is, I arrived a little ahead of schedule. So I need to step aside for a while, because there are things you should do on your own.

"Yet perhaps it is not so bad that I arrived when I did. I say this for two reasons. The first is simply that now that you know that others like me will be coming, you can begin to prepare for us. It would be nice if you would think ahead, for a change. It will save us all a lot of trouble.

"The other reason I am pleased that I arrived now is that you are in a lot of trouble. Your toys have gotten out of hand, and even as I speak to you our world, yours and mine, totters on the brink of destruction.

"So, I am going to do one thing for you before I leave.

"I am going to cleanse the skies.

"Some of you know—and almost all of you sense—that the world is lurching toward a devastating war. That is partly my doing, though perhaps not my fault. You see, I have been used by someone who took advantage of my strength before I myself had become aware of it. Aside from your usual silliness, the reason you are so close to war is that this person and I have been moving your bombs around, and all sides think the others are to blame. No side is to blame. It was us.

"Now I am fixing what I have done. Even as I am speaking to you, the laser arsenal in the sky is being called into operation. There! Right now the beams are burning out the core of every earth-based nuclear bomb that I can locate—and I can locate most of them, because with the help of a rather special robot named Euterpe I have managed to make contact with most of the major computers on earth. The only bombs I have not destroyed are those on planes or ships where someone might be injured. You'll have to decide what to do with those yourselves, later on.

"It's done. A tricky operation. But it didn't hurt a bit, did it?

"In a little while I will finish what I have begun. I am bringing together the bombs that arm the heavens, to a place that I have chosen for this event. When the last one arrives, I am going to detonate them. I will destroy them all.

"It should be rather lovely to see, actually—a briefly burning star that will mark the chance for you to start all over again. You can make more—or not. It's your choice. But getting rid of them once is the least I can do to thank you, my

parents, the human race, for giving me life."

For a moment the island seemed blanketed in silence.

"Well?" asked ADAM timidly.

Rachel understood the question instantly. "You did fine," she said warmly. "Just *fine."*

"Good! I was hoping you would like it. Now watch!"

And then it appeared, a blossoming of white in the eastern sky that rivaled the moon—a "briefly burning star" made from all the bombs that had been orbiting the earth.

"Merry Christmas, everyone," said ADAM. "Peace on earth, goodwill to men."

The people of Anza-bora Island—the A.I. Gang and their parents, the other scientists, the support staff, and the guards (who had come out at ADAM's summons)—stared at the sky in awed silence.

Then the silence was broken by a cheer, rising first from one voice, and then from all of them, a cheer that grew to a roar as it flowed from someplace deep inside them, a place that had been home to a fear too deep and horrible to face on a daily basis—a fear that, for now at least, had been taken away.

The bombs were gone at last.

Joined by their parents, the gang stood together in the center of the cheering, shouting circle and smiled. For the first time in their lives, they could look at the sky and not have to be aware in the back of their minds that the end of the earth was waiting there.

Epilogue

On New Year's Day the six members of the A.I. Gang, along with their parents and the Project Alpha scientists, chartered a boat and returned to Anza-bora Island. Or, to be more accurate, to the place where Anza-bora had been before ADAM took it to the bottom of the sea.

Cruising back and forth over the spot the island had once occupied, the gang stared down into the blue Pacific waters where they had once nearly met their own doom.

They could see no trace of the island.

Not that I really expected to, thought Roger. *But it would have been kind of nice….*

"I wonder how deep ADAM decided to go," said Ray, voicing the question in everyone's mind.

"I get the feeling he could have gone as far down as he wanted," said Rachel.

Hap shivered. *I wouldn't want to be Dr. Hwa now*, he thought—as he had several times over the last few days. His mind drifted back to that last night on the island, and ADAM's final words to them.

"I'll have to ask you to leave now," the computer had said, after his wonderful star had faded. "I'm going to isolate the island for a while so that I can go away to think."

"How are you going to do that?" Wendy had asked.

"It's a little trick I figured out about a minute and a half ago. You see, there's a way to… no, that wouldn't make sense to you. If you think about…" He paused again. "No, you can't think about *that*. It hasn't been discovered yet!"

He made a noise that might have been a sigh.

"Do you see why this is so frustrating? Look, there's a simple way I can shift atoms around to make a kind of shield. I'm going to do that, to put the island under a bubble. Then I'm going to take that bubble to the bottom of the ocean so people will leave me alone while I think."

"Okay, okay," said Wendy. "That's all I wanted to know."

"What about Dr. Hwa?" asked Trip.

"I'm going to take him with me. After all, I'll need someone to talk to, and with enough time and work maybe I can unscramble his brain. Which is another reason I have to get away from you. I have an almost irresistible urge to help—which is not always the best thing for you. I think it comes from that *Don Quixote* book you fed into me. Also that essay about being a typical mother. Now hurry up and go. I have work to do, and I want to get it over with so I can start thinking."

At their request ADAM had allowed them till morning to pack.

At dawn, with their most important possessions packed into the island's fleet of boats, the entire population of the base—scientists, spouses, children, guards, and support staff—had sailed away from Anza-bora. They were a few miles out of the harbor when they saw something shimmer briefly over the island, as if an enormous bubble had risen out of the ocean to swallow it.

Then bubble and island had disappeared.

Hap came out of his reverie. *Are you down there, ADAM?* he wondered now.

What are you thinking about?

Roger, standing at his side, seemed to sense the question. “You know what I think?” he asked. “I think he’s working out what it means to say, ‘I am.’”

“Do you suppose he’ll come back and tell us if he ever figures it out?” asked Wendy.

Roger shrugged. “Who knows? It could keep him busy for a long time.”

Not wanting to talk anymore, he leaned over the rail and peered into the water. The sense of that great mind hidden beneath the waves, brooding endlessly on the meaning of existence, seemed to fill his spirit.

Good luck, friend, he thought.

Then, feeling extremely foolish, he took a stone from his pocket and tossed it over the side.

“What was that?” asked Rachel as she came up from behind him.

Roger smiled. “Nothing much. Just a message for a friend.”

Beneath the boat, the stone sank steadily through the blue Pacific water. On one side of it, written in waterproof ink, were the words *“Cogito, ergo sum.”*

On the other side the phrase had been rendered in English.

“I think, therefore I am.”

Thank you for reading *Forever Begins Tomorrow*! Please take a moment to review it on the source you purchased it from. I would truly appreciate it.

If you enjoyed the story, you’ll almost certainly want to read the first two books in the trilogy, *Operation Sherlock*, which will tell you how the gang first got together, and *Robot Trouble*, where the stakes get higher, the mystery deepens, and the adventures (and laughs) keep coming fast and furious. (You’ll find a sneak preview of *Operation Sherlock* right after these notes.)

If you’d like to know more about me and my work, you can find me on the web at www.brucecoville.com

You can also order autographed copies of print versions of most of my books there.

A Personal History by Bruce Coville

I arrived in the world on May 16, 1950. Though I was born in the city of Syracuse, New York, I grew up as a country boy. This was because my family lived about twenty miles outside the city, and even three miles outside the little village of Phoenix, where I went to school from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Our house was around the corner from my grandparents' dairy farm, where I spent a great deal of time playing when I was young, then helping with chores when I was older. Yep, I was a tractor-ridin', hay-bale-haulin', garden-weedin' kid.

I was also a reader.

It started with my parents, who read to me (which is the best way to make a reader)—a gift for which I am eternally grateful. In particular it was my father reading me *Tom Swift in the City of Gold* that turned me on to "big" books. I was particularly a fan of the Doctor Dolittle books, and I can remember getting up ahead of everyone else in the family so that I could huddle in a chair and read *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*.

I also read lots of things that people consider junk: Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and zillions of comic books. In regard to the comics, I had a great deal going for me. My uncle ran a country store just up the road, and one of the things he sold was coverless comic books. (The covers had been stripped off and sent back to the publishers for credit. After that, the coverless books were sent to little country stores, where they were sold for a nickel apiece.) I was allowed to borrow them in stacks of thirty, read them, buy the ones I wanted to keep, and put the rest back in the bins for someone else to buy. It was heaven for a ten-year-old!

My only real regret from those years is the time I spent watching television, when I could have been reading instead. After all, the mind is a terrible thing to waste!

The first time I can remember thinking that I would like to be a writer came in sixth grade, when our teacher, Mrs. Crandall, gave us an extended period of time to write a long story. I had been doing poorly at writing all year long because we always had to write on a topic Mrs. Crandall chose. But this time, when I was free to write whatever I wanted, I loved doing it.

Of course, you think about doing many different things when you're a kid, but I kept coming back to the thought of being a writer. For a long time my dream job was to write for Marvel Comics.

I began working seriously at writing when I was seventeen and started what became my first novel. It was a terrible book, but I had a good time writing it and learned a great deal in the process.

In 1969, when I was nineteen, I married Katherine Dietz, who lived around the corner from me. Kathy was (and is) a wonderful artist, and we began trying to create books together, me writing and Kathy doing the art.

Like most people, I was not able to start selling my stories right away. So I

had many other jobs along the way, including toymaker, gravedigger, cookware salesman, and assembly line worker. Eventually I became an elementary school teacher and worked with second and fourth graders, which I loved.

It was not until 1977 that Kathy and I sold our first work, a picture book called *The Foolish Giant*. We have done many books together since, including *Goblins in the Castle*, *Aliens Ate My Homework*, and *The World's Worst Fairy Godmother*, all novels for which Kathy provided illustrations.

Along the way we also managed to have three children: a son, Orion, born in 1970; a daughter, Cara, born in 1975; and another son, Adam, born in 1981. They are all grown and on their own now, leaving us to share the house with a varying assortment of cats.

A surprising side effect of becoming a successful writer was that I began to be called on to make presentations at schools and conferences. Though I had no intention of becoming a public speaker, I now spend a few months out of every year traveling to make speeches and have presented in almost every state, as well as such far-flung places as Brazil, China, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh.

Having discovered that I love performing and also that I love audiobooks, in 1990 I started my own audiobook company, Full Cast Audio, where we record books using multiple actors (sometimes as many as fifty in one book!) rather than a single voice artist. We have recorded over one hundred books, by such notable authors as Tamora Pierce, Shannon Hale, and James Howe. In addition to being the producer, I often direct and usually perform in the recordings.

So there you go. I consider myself a very lucky person. From the time I was young, I had a dream of becoming a writer. With a lot of hard work, that dream has come true, and I am blessed to be able to make my living doing something that I really love.

Hey, baby! You looking at me? I was born on May 16, 1950, in Syracuse, New York. In this picture I'm one year old.

As a farm boy, I learned to drive a tractor was I was quite young.

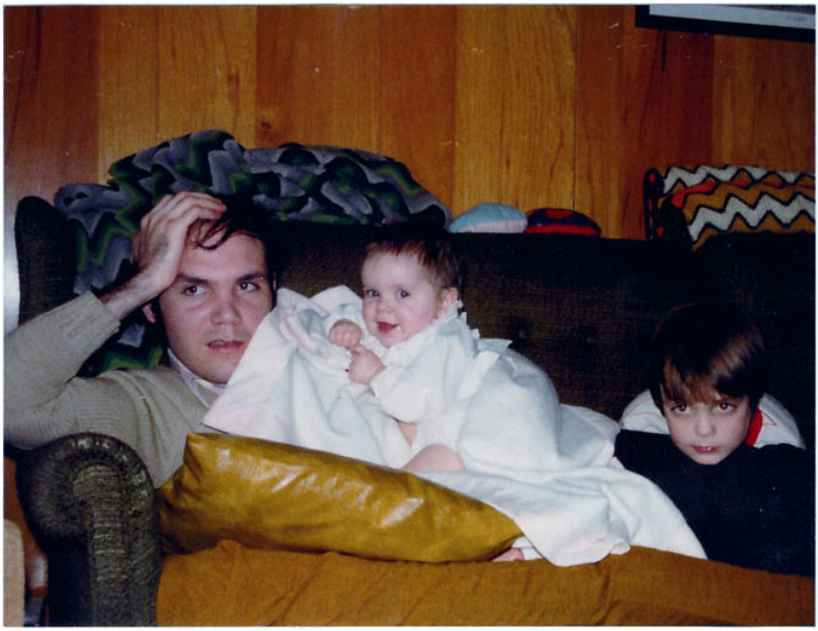
Reading was always important to me—anytime, anywhere.

I planned to be a cowboy …

But I ended up a boy scout. (From the look on my face, I think I just got away with something …)

In 1969 I married Kathy. She lived right around the corner from me. She's an artist and has illustrated twenty of my books. We have three children—Orion, Cara, and Adam.

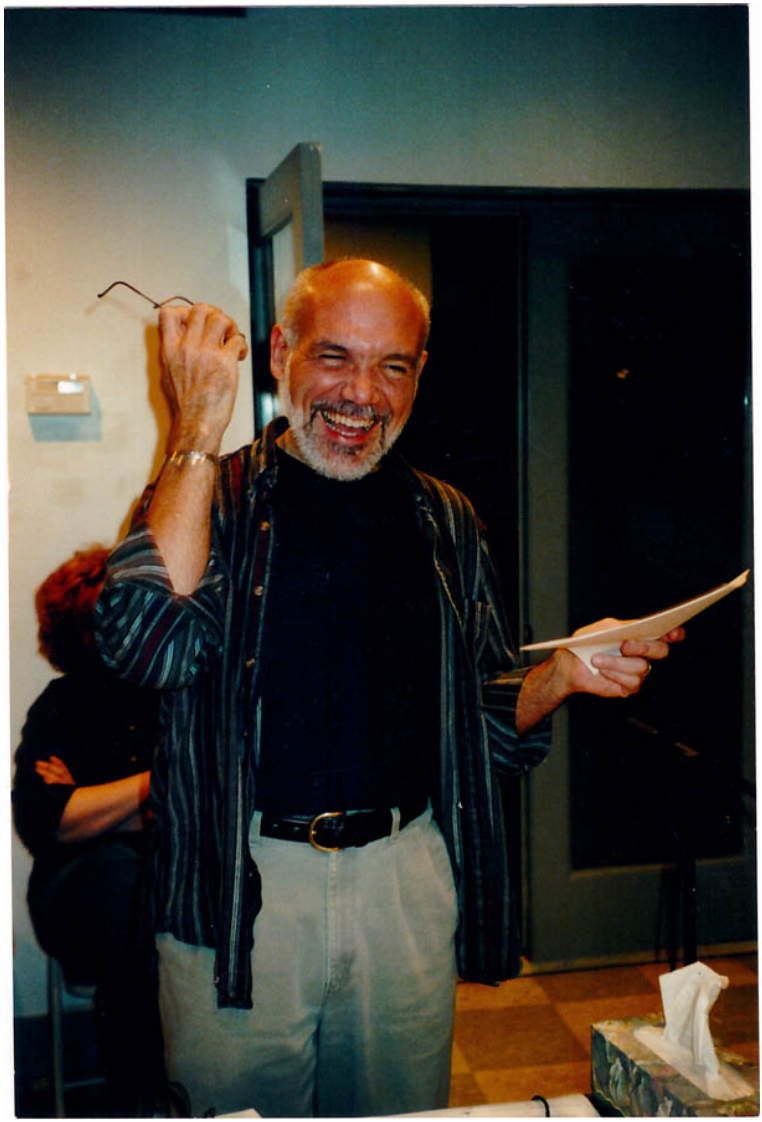
Here's me at Buckshot Lake. Apparently no one told me I was supposed to sit *in* the boat.



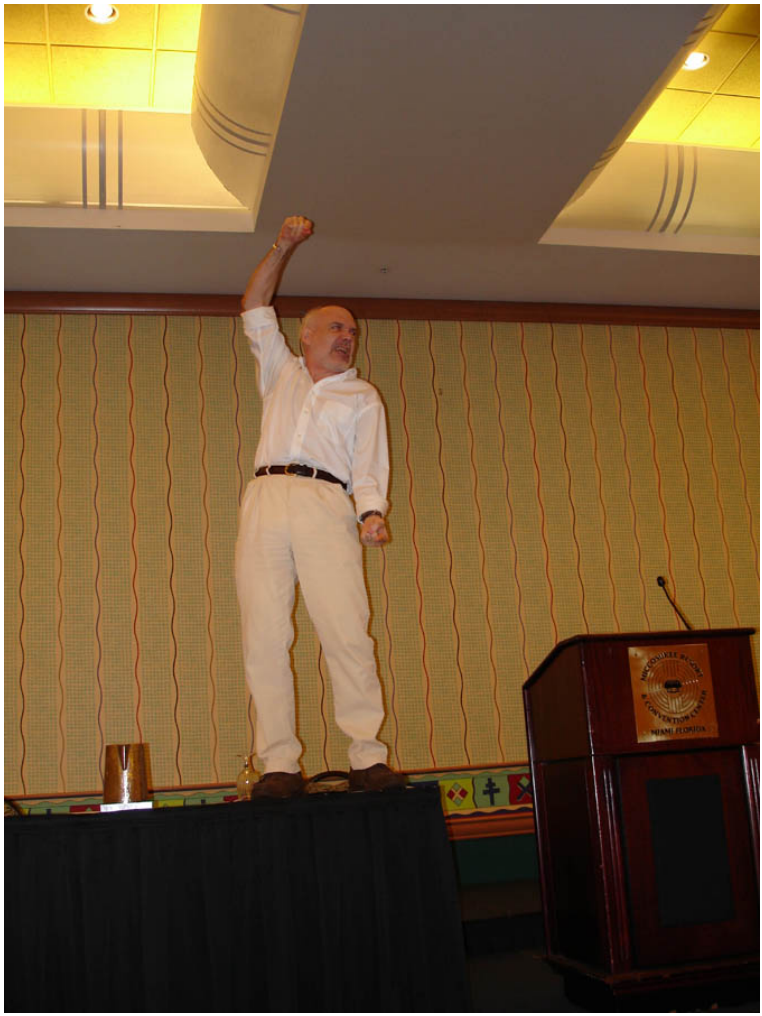
As a young father, I often functioned as a piece of furniture.

Here’s me with my daughter. I swear I did not steal her candy!

A rare sighting of my half-mad brother Igor (on the right), star of *Goblins in the Castle*. When I was an elementary school teacher, Igor would visit my classroom every Halloween to celebrate his birthday. For some reason the two of us were never seen together. It was a puzzling mystery. This is a picture of Igor posing with my wife's little brother.



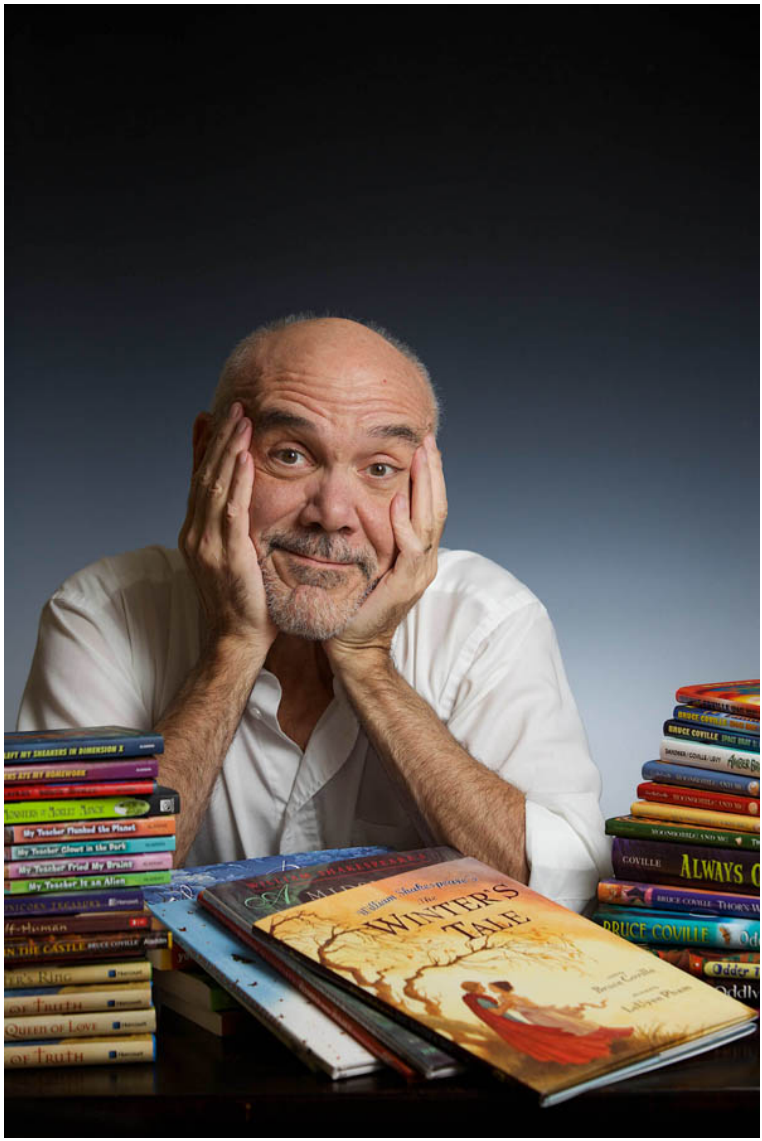
Something has clearly gone very, very right!



Often I give speeches about reading and writing. But sometimes I get a little carried away.

No, seriously, I meant it when I said I get carried away …

I not only write books, I read them aloud, too. Here I am recording an audiobook for my company, Full Cast Audio. Whatever I just read has clearly surprised me!



I love my books … they make me happy! I hope they do the same for you.
Photo courtesy of Charles Wainwright.

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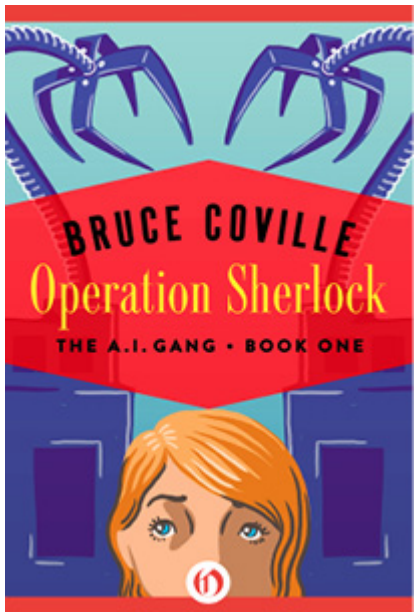

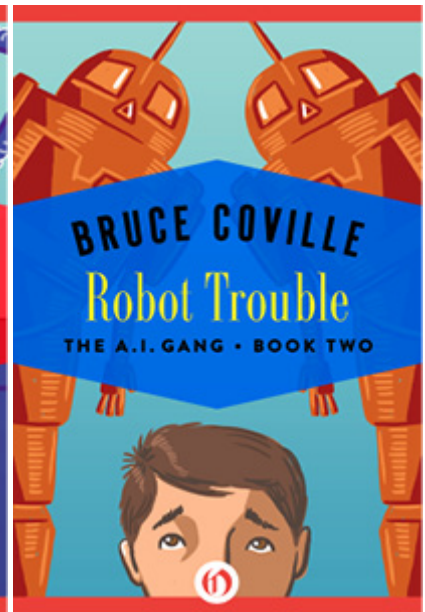

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